

In the Shadow of Karl Barth: Charlotte von Kirschbaum

**In the Shadow of Karl Barth:
Charlotte von Kirschbaum**

Renate Köbler

Translated by
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Charlotte von Kirschbaum
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Translator's Preface

After receiving the B.D. and Th.M. at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia I spent the academic year 1951-52 at the University of Basel in advanced study in Old Testament. That major interest, however, could not keep me away from Karl Barth's lectures in theology and his English language seminar. There, at his home in the Pilgerstrasse, I first met Charlotte von Kirschbaum. Like many other foreign students, I wondered about her relationship with Karl Barth. There was gossip at the time; how much, I did not know until I read Renate Köbler's book. One thing was clear: this attractive and brilliant woman occupied a major place in Barth's life and work.

I had only a few opportunities to talk with her, and no opportunity to get to know her personally. Three and half decades later, when Renate Köbler's book first came into my hands, I read it eagerly and urged Westminster/John Knox Press to publish it. It gives me a great deal of pleasure now to present it to a wider circle of readers, in partial payment of the debt we all owe to Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum.

KEITH CRIM

For some are in the darkness
And some are in the light,
And we see the ones in light;
Those in the dark we do not see.

—*Bertold Brecht*,
to the melody of “Mack the Knife”

Preface

Charlotte von Kirschbaum, in the shadow of Karl Barth: this title may cause some amazement. A theologian of our century who did not seek recognition through publication for herself, she nevertheless, in her life and work, exerted a major influence on one of the greatest theological works of the twentieth century, that of Karl Barth.

Charlotte von Kirschbaum is a woman who thus far has found little recognition from researchers into the history of the church and of theology, a woman whose life has been, at most, mere grist for the theological gossip mills.

Hans Prolingheuer first called my attention to the name of Charlotte von Kirschbaum, which until then had been completely unknown to me. In the summer semester of 1984, thanks to the initiative of some deeply committed students, he was invited to lecture at the University of Marburg. He gave to us who were studying there the privilege of being the first group to discuss his book *Kleine politische Kirchengeschichte* ("A Brief Political History of the Church"), which had just been published. During that semester we were concerned with the as yet little-studied political side of the Protestant churches' struggle against the Nazi regime, and I had had to correct my previously naïve picture of the

Confessing Church, learning slowly and also painfully to distinguish among its various faces.

When I told Mr. Prolingheuer that I wanted to write my seminar paper on the activities of women in recent Protestant church history, a field where little research had been done, and asked his advice, he mentioned Charlotte von Kirschbaum's name. The limited information about her in the Barth biography by Eberhard Busch further aroused my curiosity.

Since there had been no publication dealing with her, and since if she is mentioned at all in the literature it is only marginally, I needed to make contact first of all with those who had known her personally. I was able to talk with Karl Barth's oldest son, Professor Markus Barth, and his wife, Mrs. Rose Marie Barth, who was a close friend and confidant of Charlotte von Kirschbaum; with Professor Eberhard Busch, former student and research assistant to Barth and author of the extensive Barth biography; with Wolf von Kirschbaum, nephew of Charlotte; and with her close friends Professor Helmut Gollwitzer and Dr. Lili Simon, who came to know her while they were students in Basel.

All of them were able to bring this woman to life for me through their accounts. As I endeavored to think myself into her situation and to understand and feel what her world was like, her thoughts, the way of life she chose for herself, it became my ambition to present the testimony of as many of her contemporaries as possible. My research paper became a biography of Charlotte von Kirschbaum, her life and her work, written from my perspective as a woman concerned to present a critically informed view: a work of a sympathetic partisan, according to the principles of contemporary feminist research.

I sent the finished manuscript to all those whose help I had sought, with the request that they read it critically and make suggestions for supplementing

or correcting it. Mr. Prolingheuer encouraged me to rework the material with a view to its eventual publication, and it is through his efforts that this book appears now.

In the process of revision I considered all the suggestions made by those from whom I had received information. In addition, an article of mine in the journal *Junge Kirche* drew many written responses from persons who had known Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth personally. As far as was possible, I made the suggested changes.

In addition to the published works listed in the bibliography I have listed separately, as sources, my conversations in person or by telephone with those persons and my letters from them, as well as some unpublished documents.

It has been my concern to liberate Charlotte von Kirschbaum, as a theological partner and "suitable companion" to Karl Barth, from the shadow existence that became her lot after her death. [For this reason, the second half of the book includes two of her articles, an "Address for the Movement 'Free Germany'" and "The Role of Women in the Proclamation of the Word"—TR.] My hope in addition is that I can make a small contribution to a neglected part of Barth's biography and of Barth research.

I would like to thank all those who share my concern and who through personal conversations or written communication were of great help to me in sketching the life of this woman. My special thanks go to Wolf von Kirschbaum, who helped in the launching of my book and who graciously provided me with photographs of his aunt.

I must also not fail to thank those who made contributions from the shadows: Hans Prolingheuer, for making my work possible and supporting it throughout; my friends Peter Winzen and Esther Rohr, who accompanied me on some of my travels and were valued partners in conversation; and, not least, my

friend Petra Rodenhausen, who was of great help in the preparation of my manuscript.

Material in brackets within a quotation has been added by the author. Where there is more than one quotation in a sentence, the note that follows applies to them all.

Prologue

It was the winter semester of 1937–38. Barely three years had passed since Karl Barth had been removed from his teaching position in Bonn and returned to his hometown of Basel as professor in the university there. The Church College in Berlin was closed, and Martin Niemöller had already been in a concentration camp for three months. Karl Barth was giving his lectures on the exegesis of 1 Peter. Many German students, some of them in their advanced semesters, others in their early semesters but older in years (these were mostly Jewish students in jurisprudence), and a sprinkling of worthy Swiss filled the classroomlike hall on the Upper Stapfelberg, not far from the old university on the Rhine. Eagerly I took my place behind a small pleasant-looking woman, a good ten years older than I was, hardly a student but an intent listener. When I spoke to her a few weeks later, I invited her to visit me and asked for advice about what to do after finishing my training as a nurse. Would it be better to attend a school of social work for women in order to become a parish assistant or to plunge directly into the study of theology? She answered, "If you are interested in what is really going on in theology, then you must study theology."

This was Lollo, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, and I followed her advice in a manner different from what

she and I had intended. For soon thereafter I found myself in the Barth household as Markus Barth's fiancée and met her again as "Aunt Lollo."

Eduard Thurneysen, then pastor of the cathedral in Basel, who had confirmed me and followed the subsequent course of my life, advised me, even before I became personally acquainted with my future parents-in-law, not to meddle in that which was the responsibility of the older generation. By this he meant the situation in which Mama and Papa Barth lived together under one roof with "Aunt Lollo." He told me that the relationship among these three persons was unique, something that had developed over the years, and I should simply accept it as such without question. I should love each of the three of them for himself or herself. At the time I had only a vague idea of what he was talking about, but I soon learned that he was right and his advice was good. The less that gossips in Basel, and especially elsewhere, knew about the house on the Albanring, the more they found to talk about. None of them had any idea how much suffering there was under the roof of that house. But the work of theology was joyful, and the involvement in that work, to whatever extent, held the three together through toils and perils.

In later years Lollo could still say, "You know, he called me to him"—as if I had ever doubted it! It was obvious that Karl Barth needed her urgently, not merely as a competent secretary who took down each of his lectures from dictation and wrote them out for the printer, who handled most of his correspondence and kept his records and minutes, but who was first and foremost the companion of his busy life. No day passed without important letters from friends or advice seekers, without decisions to be made. Her keen understanding of human nature and her friendliness were of help to many, as were her loving criticism and comforting patience, but most of all to Karl Barth.