Eva and Otto
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Published by Purdue University Press

Pfister, Tom, et al.
Purdue University Press, 2019.
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2. Study in France and at the Walkemühle (1926–1932)

At the end of 1926 at the age of sixteen, Eva and her family left their home in Goldap and moved to Kassel, a midsize town with an active cultural life not far from Frankfurt in central Germany where her oldest brother Erich had become a lawyer. For a short time Eva worked in Erich’s law office to acquire clerical skills, and in the spring of 1927 she went to Nancy, France, as an exchange student to study at the university and perfect her knowledge of French.

While living with a French family, Eva quickly overcame some initial difficulties with the language. She was not comfortable, however, with her host family, finding them narrow-minded, and she rebelled against their conservative views. She also fell in love with another exchange student, “deeply, immaturely, felt very guilty about it, and ran away from it, and from all the feelings that it had stirred up.”

Despite the trauma of this relationship and the conflict with her host family, Eva’s experience of living and studying in France would have enormous value in her later life. “What I had gained during that period in France,” she later reflected, “was not any kind of growth in terms of self-knowledge. But my French was now really good, and I also had learned to love and to know a lot about French literature, philosophy, and history—a fact which some years later became a life saver in a very critical situation, and which continued to be helpful all through my life.”

After her year of study in France, Eva returned home to Kassel, Germany, in 1928. She felt that the time had come for her to make some “far-reaching decisions” about the further course of her life. She decided not to return to France to continue her studies at the university and instead “to join a philosophical-political group of idealists led by
a Kantian Professor of Philosophy, Leonard Nelson, who had laid the scientific, philosophical foundation for a moral obligation to political activism.” This group, which her brother Erich had previously joined, was the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK).² Eva’s brother Erich suggested, and Eva agreed, that she should become a personal assistant to Leonard Nelson. Eva’s decision to become involved with the ISK would transform her life for the next twenty years.

Not much has been written in English about the history of the ISK.³ Leonard Nelson (1882–1927), a pacifist and idealistic professor of philosophy at the University of Göttingen, had initially founded the predecessor of the ISK in 1917 under the name Internationaler Jugend-Bund (International Youth League, IJB). Nelson’s work drew from the teachings of post-Kantian philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773–1843). The IJB did not fit within the philosophical and political frameworks of either the German communist youth organization, which banned its members from joining the IJB in 1922, or the German social democratic youth organization from which the IJB was expelled in 1925. After 1925, the IJB became the independent socialist splinter group known as the ISK. Based on Nelson’s teachings, the ISK sought to educate an elite group of ethical leaders who would, by their active political involvement and personal example, help improve the human condition.

Eva described the unusual commitments required to become an active member of the ISK:

You had to pledge your life to it. Also, your lifestyle had to change in accordance with the predominance of the political obligation: no personal wealth; life of utmost simplicity; no marriage or other family ties; vegetarianism; rejection of church directed dogmas. In case of conflict, personal ties had to be severed, and in order to be able to do this when it was required, strenuous character education with severe personal demands had to be accepted. The educational maxim was: utter honesty; follow the golden rule, or, as it was rather expressed, the maxim of the Kantian philosophy of Ethics and Justice: When there is conflict, not to do unto others what you would not want them to do unto you.

Eva later explained why she joined the ISK at that time:
To understand the situation then: We lived in Germany under the Weimar Republic, a relatively short period of Parliamentary Democracy, squeezed between the reign of absolute Monarchy under the Kaiser until 1918, and the terror rule of Hitler which started in 1933. During these fifteen years, the men and women in the Weimar Republic tried to make democracy work in Germany. But there were too many odds against them which made their attempts doomed to failure: a desperate economic situation with unemployment reaching hopeless proportions, and with little or no chance for a member of the working class to make a decent living for himself and for his children, leave alone to rise into a higher strata of society. There were also the effects of a lost war, with feelings of frustration fanned into exaggerated nationalism and desire for revenge.

It is true that the situation did not always look hopeless during those years: For the first time in German history, a member of the working class had become President: Friedrich Ebert. Many men and women of good will—and many of humble beginnings—were members of the Reichstag, and tried to pass good legislation. And there were organizations outside of the government that had high aspirations to create a better world, thinking they had answers to the most burning problems, and feeling that, if only enough people would devote their lives to the causes of peace and justice, they could not help but make progress, and avoid the specter of impending disaster.

Yet, Ebert, and all the other people who tried so hard, had to fight against non-acceptance, against apathy, against lack of democratic traditions, against economic and national misery, against violent outbursts from radical groups of the left and of the right. And shortly after Ebert’s death in 1925, an ardent traditional monarchist, former General under Kaiser Wilhelm, Paul von Hindenburg, was elected President of the Republic. Slowly, but irrevocably, he moved the nation from one crisis to another, and finally towards the election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor. Elected through the disintegrating democratic process, he very quickly abolished every remaining vestige of democracy that had been so painfully built up during the years of the Weimar Republic, and established the rule of terror.
Eva described the idealistic duty motivating her decision: “Feeling that the country—and perhaps mankind—was sliding towards catastrophe (hunger, violence, curtailment of freedom, war), we were convinced that it was everyone’s sacred duty to do whatever he or she could do to stop this crazy slide. We were convinced that there were more good people than bad, and if only all the good people would join forces, give up the comforts of their own lives, do their duty, then right had a chance to win over wrong.” Eva later admitted that this was “naive, perhaps, knowing nothing about power politics; yet understandable if one agrees with the thought that one should follow one’s own conscience.” Eva was willing to accept the enormous sacrifices of this commitment:

So I decided: not to continue my studies at the University, not to train myself and look for a rewarding and well paying job so that I could make a good life for myself, and start helping out mother financially; to reject the thought of personal happiness such as love, marriage, children. And instead to devote my life to the struggle for what is right.

Encouraged by her older brother Erich, Eva took an initial step in her commitment to the ISK by agreeing to work for Leonard Nelson as his personal assistant. That arrangement, however, did not last long. “This first step was too big for me to handle. I was quite young, and the utter loneliness in the house of this brilliant man was more than I could take.” When her brother Ernst returned home on leave from his work with a German engineering firm in South Africa, he strongly objected to Eva’s decision to become involved in the ISK, and she seized on the opportunity to leave Nelson: “Ernst very strongly impressed on me that I had no right to do what I was doing, but that, if I did not want to continue my studies, I had to get a job and help support mother and the children. I was quickly convinced, said good-bye to Nelson, and went to Dortmund, to work in the record store of one of Ernst’s friends.”

For the next few months, Eva held a position as a sales clerk in the record shop. Unknown to her when she took the job, Ernst had arranged the position for her and had initially paid her salary in the hope that she would abandon her political activism and “life of self-denial” with the ISK. When Eva discovered this and learned that Ernst had hoped that she and his unmarried friend would grow to like each other and that
she would lead the kind of life that he envisioned for her, she felt betrayed and quit the job immediately. This episode, along with historical events, would put an end to communications between Eva and Ernst for many years.

Eva was now ready to turn back and commit herself fully to the ISK, and she agreed to become a student at the ISK’s special country school called the Walkemühle. This began a period of her life that she later confessed was “most difficult to describe.” Though her years at the Walkemühle were positive in many respects, they were extremely negative in others. On one hand, “those three years . . . were invaluable in terms of what I learned about myself.” But on the other, they were “terribly and, in retrospect, unnecessarily, painful—so much so that at the end of the three years, I almost died—and that is to be taken literally.”

The Walkemühle was, as Eva described it, “an international Liberal Arts College created by Leonard Nelson that was attended by young people (not all Germans) who had decided to accept the rigorous training of character and intellect which would prepare them to take an active part in the political life of their countries.” In addition to this college, the Walkemühle also taught preschool and elementary school students who had been entrusted by their parents (most of whom believed in Nelson’s philosophy) to receive the best possible education. “The school was small, in the heart of rural, fairly backwards, Germany. Our instructors were educators of renown, philosophers, mathematicians, economists, historians; also shop teachers, and a wonderful old gardener whom we all loved.” Eva noted that there were also “many other great people on the staff who not only did their work in house and kitchen, but were friends and educators as well.”

The director of the Walkemühle, Minna Specht, had an enormous impact on Eva. Eva described her as “one of the leading educators of our time, and the most beautiful, creative woman I ever had the fortune to know. She was the close friend and co-worker of Leonard Nelson; and she was also loved by all who ever had any prolonged contact with her.” Specht’s work at the Walkemühle would end when the Nazis shut the school down in 1933. She would then move the school with the young children first to Denmark and then to England.

The ISK’s rigorous education at the Walkemühle involved, in essence, training students to find ethical solutions to human problems through rigorous application of reason and Socratic dialogue. Eva explained:
All of us who were there were chosen, and we accepted to spend three years of rigid training willingly, if not really knowingly. Character and mind were to be trained, helped to be honest, independent, and strong. Intellectually, that meant that we had no typical college education there. All courses were held entirely in the Socratic Method, where we students, in small groups, started out with a question in a given subject matter, and tried to find solutions, in rigorous self and mutual examination and questioning—the instructor not providing any answers, only making certain that we did not stray, and that no glib statement remained unsupported or unchallenged. We were to experience—and we did—that honest answers towards truth could be found by ourselves, not based on any outside dogmatic authority. The morning sessions were devoted to these discussions. In the afternoons, everyone wrote detailed minutes of the morning work from which he or she developed the questions to be handled the following morning.

A very difficult process, slow, painstaking; but rewarding, and one that gave confidence in the potential of one's own
reason. It was never easy, but went rather well in studies of math where truth was objective, not shaded by emotions. Economics, history, was possible also. Philosophy much harder, and inter-personal relations . . .

“Interpersonal relations,” Eva later observed, “were not overtly handled at all.” The students at the Walkemühle knew from the outset that they were expected to train themselves to be independent of emotional ties. Help was offered to the students only in an impersonal way, but it was not without warmth. Leonard Nelson’s father was “loved by all, a frail, old gentleman, with all the grace and culture of a totally different lifestyle, who had accepted ours, yet added to it the rich warmth which was part of his nature.” “Vater Nelson,” as he was called, “had wonderful records, was a great musician, and played the piano beautifully—sometimes he and Minna Specht would play duets for us. The evenings which we all spent once a week in his living room, were filled with music and reading (I remember especially Van Gogh’s Letters to his brother Theo. They were read beautifully by Gustav Heckmann, our Math teacher, and outstanding leader in Socratic conversations, and they opened a new world for me.)”

Eva studying at the Walkemühle in 1929.
The students could never discuss their individual feelings, and Eva had intense feelings of guilt for having promised not to have any contact whatsoever with her mother during those three years—even though her mother lived only a short distance from the Walkemühle. Eva acknowledged that she and other students had freely decided to accept such restrictions and expected them to be difficult. But they believed that they would grow from coping with their pain. “This was a lot easier in theory than in reality,” Eva recalled, “and I did not grow, I only hurt, especially also from being aware that my decision was unbelievably painful for my mother.”

Eva’s guilt about cutting off all contact with her mother was not the only emotion she suppressed. “Other feelings began to stir in me, as was natural: for a special younger girl towards whom I felt deep friendship and understanding; for a boy with whom I would have loved, and sometimes did, to talk alone, and walk, and go on bike hikes, and just feel his presence.” The consequence of being unable to talk with anyone about the “growing turmoil” within her was nearly fatal:

The feeling of guilt grew and grew and became overwhelming, guilt at not being able to live up to my promise, at being a failure. With what we know now, it was not surprising that I became ill, very ill. Nothing organic, it appeared; I did not become irrational in my behavior either; I just could no longer eat, or if I did, keep food down. So I became very weak, and discovered that this was perhaps the only way out: being too ill, no demands which I could not meet, could be made upon me, nor could I make them upon myself. I gradually became free of guilt.

It must have been a frightening experience for all around me who cared: to see me slip away. First at school, then at home. Now I could go home, be loved and cared for by mother, and Erich and [his wife] Herta, staying in the beautiful little room which belonged to my sister Ruth—bright, red furniture, flowers, love and care surrounding me. In my memory, this was a rather soft, nice time for me—no pain, just gently floating in a warm world without inner conflicts.

They tried what they could, especially Erich, to get me out of it: doctors, hospital, diagnosis that I had to go on a meat
broth diet if I wanted to live. I refused; for ethical reasons I was a vegetarian, and I would have put myself outside the circle of my friends, if I had followed that diet—that I could and would not do. The local doctors did not know what else to do.

Eva’s brother Erich saved her life. “In his despair and overwhelming desire to bring me back to living,” Eva recalled, “Erich found a vegetarian doctor in Switzerland, with psychiatric orientation: Dr. Bircher-Benner.” Erich’s wife Herta took Eva to Switzerland, leaving Erich and their little child behind “in a demonstration of love that I can never forget.” The treatment was successful. “In Zurich, I slowly was guided back, helped to see my guilt feelings for what they really were, helped to accept life and nature and emotion for something real and good, and not to be ashamed of. I learned some degree of self-understanding, and as I did, I started to get well.”