Eva and Otto

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After her study at the Walkemühle and her recovery in Switzerland, Eva moved to Essen, a city in the central part of Germany’s Ruhr region. She held a number of small jobs while devoting most of her time and strength to political work with the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK) in its fight against the rise of Hitler.

These were hard years with high unemployment in Germany. Most jobs that Eva held were temporary: waiting tables, cleaning, secretarial work in a department store. She was able to earn enough money to eat and pay the rent and was proud when her salary “made it possible to save some money, and to take gifts home for mother and the children: Hans, Rudi, and Ruth.” But the primary purpose of these jobs was to allow her to engage in her work with the ISK: “The main thrust in these years was the desperate, rather naive, attempt to help stem the tide of Nazism.” The ISK “tried with all its might to get all people of good will together to form a united front against the Nazis.”

Eva recalled how the ISK, “with tremendous efforts . . . guided in Berlin by Willi Eichler . . . launched a daily paper Der Funke (the Spark) in addition to the monthly magazine which had existed for a long time.” Eva and other ISK members in Essen were primarily involved “in the daily selling of the paper in the streets, at corners, in pubs, in front of factories, from house to house—on Sundays also in the country to which we rode on our bikes.”

I will never forget the exhausted look on face and body of the coal miners, when they came out of the pits: pale, covered with dust, with no spring in their walk. I don’t forget the tenements
where they lived, the children. In pubs, I often ran into prostitutes who would buy my paper—perhaps not to read it, but because I was a young girl, alone? And especially I don’t forget the physical fear that I experienced when I would walk back and forth on the sidewalk in front of a big store, calling out: “Der Funke! Unite against the Nazis!” And when walking, or rather marching, behind me, would be uniformed storm troopers—would they trip me, would they thrust a knife? Plain, cold fear; but one walked on. It was frightening—one did not often see a young girl alone at that time, doing political work.

Members of the small ISK group in Essen also participated actively in political discussions: “asking annoying questions in local Nazi meetings; giving talks in small towns and villages at trade union or cultural gatherings, at our own group meetings.” As Eva recalled, “It seemed important to repeat over and over again that only in joining ranks could the Nazi threat be overcome.” They experienced hostility and threats at the Nazi meetings, but Eva never encountered physical violence.

The ISK continued to have fundamental philosophical and political disagreements with the German Communist Party (KPD) and remained split from the major German socialist party, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Despite such differences, the ISK recognized the urgent need for unity among these parties in seeking to prevent Hitler from taking power. In 1932, the ISK reached out to the KPD and the SPD to unite in an attempt to prevent the Nazis from gaining control of Germany in the Reichstag election of July 1932. Eva recalled that the ISK’s “Dringender Appell für die Einheit” (Urgent Appeal for Unity) was the “last vital, desperate attempt of the ISK to try blocking the Nazis’ ascent to power.”

Eva explained that this appeal was made “to everyone, members of the Socialist and Communist Parties, of the Trade Unions, the Independents,” to finally create a united labor front to resist Hitler. “Wherever possible, we put big posters on billboards, and our small local groups organized meetings where more people and organizations were encouraged to support this appeal by signing.” The appeal was also published in the ISK’s newspaper, Der Funke, and in placards posted throughout Berlin. Signatories to the appeal included ISK
leaders Willi Eichler and Minna Specht; scientists Albert Einstein, Franz Oppenheimer, Emil Gumbel, and Arthur Kronfeld; writers Kurt Hiller, Erich Kästner, Heinrich Mann, Ernst Toller, and Arnold Zweig; and artist Käthe Kollwitz.

The appeal was obviously too little too late, and any subsequent overt opposition to the Nazis quickly became very dangerous. The ISK made the same appeal against Hitler prior to the federal election in March 1933 but with fewer signatories. Soon after the placards appeared, writer Heinrich Mann and artist Käthe Kollwitz who had signed the appeal were forced by the Nazis to withdraw from the Akademie der Künste (Art Academy).³ Eva noted: “As history tells us, all these efforts, no matter how visible and logical, did not accomplish the desired results. The two political parties of the German Left went into the final elections separately, as hostile competitors; they were defeated, and after Hitler’s victory, their leaders were arrested, killed, or exiled; the organizations were dissolved, the reign of terror took over, and those active members who survived were forced underground.”

Shortly after his appointment as chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg on January 30, 1933, Hitler outlawed all opposing political parties. He used the Reichstag fire on February 27, 1933, as the basis for an emergency decree the following day that allowed him to suspend civil liberties and to raid the offices of the KPD and arrest Communist Party members. He then pushed through the Enabling Act on March 23, 1933, that essentially gave him dictatorial powers. The SPD and various socialist splinter parties and groups who had opposed Hitler, including the ISK, were banned and compelled to work underground or in exile.⁴

The final days before Hitler embarked on his reign of terror against all opponents forced drastic changes in Eva’s life. “What I had done politically had certainly not been important in the general range of things; but I had nevertheless been too visible to be ignored.” Search warrants and warrants for arrest of political opponents were issued. Eva made a quick farewell trip to Kassel to see Erich, her mother, and her younger siblings, Hans, Rudi and Ruth. “I can’t go home anymore—my place had been searched, and I must go into hiding.”

At the same time, Erich, Herta and their son Theo barely escaped with their lives to Switzerland. The Gestapo questioned Eva’s mother and her other siblings about Erich’s escape and searched their apartment but
took no further action against them. Eva lived in hiding for a short time with friends in a neighboring city.

As she planned her escape from Germany, Eva also struggled with the prospect of parting from an ISK colleague, Rudi Lieske, with whom she had developed a close relationship. Eva recalled that her ISK group in Essen had been so committed to stopping Hitler’s thrust to power that “there was room for nothing else.” But this was not quite true:

The work and friendship with Rudi that gradually turned into love sustained him and me during these years. Yet, neither he nor I at any time held any hope that this love could continue, that there would ever be conditions where we could just live together, work, be happy, have children—all these wishes that were very strong in me, were assumed to be totally impossible of fulfillment.

Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933 eliminated any hope about a future with Rudi. Eva needed to escape from Germany. Her colleagues determined that in view of her knowledge of French, she would be most useful in the anti-Nazi fight with ISK members in exile in Paris. Other ISK members, both Jewish and non-Jewish, would remain to fight Hitler in small underground groups in Germany in coordination with the Paris group. Eva would later determine, after intense emotional struggle, that her close relationship with Rudi could not survive as he remained in Germany and she worked with the ISK in Paris.

In preparing for her escape, Eva took her passport to the police station in Essen to ask for the exit permit that was necessary to leave Germany. However, the police refused and seized her passport based on a new ordinance requiring the confiscation of all passports of Jews. While staying with friends in Cologne (registered at one address and living at another), Eva devised a scheme to get her passport back. She asked a friend to send her a postal money order to the Central Post Office in Cologne. When she went to pick it up, she was asked for her identification. “I said regretfully that my passport was being held in Essen, for technical reasons, and what was I to do? I really needed that money!”

The postal official expressed sympathy and regret, but without identification he could not give Eva the money. “So I asked if he could
perhaps give me a slip of paper stating that I needed the passport in order to receive the money that was being held for me. He was glad to comply, and I had the beautiful slip, with signature and stamp, which I sent to the local Police Station in Essen.” Eva then waited. “It did not take long: One morning, the lady (a friend) at whose house I was registered came in . . . pale and a little shaking. That morning, a police constable had rung her doorbell, asked if I lived there. . . . She said, with great fear for herself and for me, that I did, but that I was not home. Well, the man said, he could just as soon have her take care of it. And he handed her my passport that she now held out to me! I can tell you—it seemed a beautiful document!”

A few days later, Eva was on a train to the Saar area—then a small internationally governed country between Germany and France that one could enter without legally leaving Germany. From there, she took another train into France and was on her way to Paris. “Friends told me later that my ploy was discovered, and that I was accused in an article in the Essen paper. I never saw the article; it was supposed to have said something about ‘Jewish girl cheating authorities of passport.’”

Eva’s flight to France in 1933 to escape the Nazi threat not only separated her from Rudi, her first real love, but also pulled her apart from most of her family. Eva’s brother Erich had been an attorney in Kassel, Germany, when Hitler took over in 1933. In addition to participating in the ISK’s anti-Nazi activities (such as distributing Der Funke and other ISK publications), Erich had represented individuals and groups who were prosecuted for resisting the Nazis. He often clashed in court with the infamous Nazi attorney (and later judge) Roland Freisler.5 As one of Hitler’s early targets, Erich barely escaped from Kassel on March 23, 1933, evading Nazi storm troopers by slipping out through a back door as they entered his office. A friend drove him to Frankfurt that day while he hid with his wife Herta and young son Theo under a blanket on the floor of the car.6 From Frankfurt they quickly caught a train to Zurich, where they arrived on March 24, 1933, with “the clothes on our backs, one small suitcase and enough money to last a few weeks.” Erich and his wife would later join Eva and other ISK colleagues in exile in Paris.

Eva’s younger brother Hans, a teacher, was also forced to leave Germany in 1933. He would flee first to Switzerland and then to France, where, after staying for a while with French teachers, he would also
join Eva and Erich at the vegetarian restaurant in Paris. A few years later, Hans would return to teaching in Minna Specht’s school, first in Denmark and then in England.

Eva would be separated from the rest of her family members for many years. After World War I, her brother Ernst had become an apprentice engineer and went to South Africa in the 1920s for his firm, a large railroad construction company in Berlin. Ernst would later help their mother Charlotte, Eva’s younger brother Rudi, and her younger sister Ruth escape from Germany to South Africa.

With her escape from Germany, Eva was about to embark on her first experience as a refugee. “A new chapter starts; there is no longer a country that I can call home.”