Eva and Otto

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4. Early Years in Exile in Paris
(1933–1935)

After Hitler took power in 1933, political parties opposing him were forced to work in exile or to conduct increasingly dangerous underground resistance work in Germany. The ISK members did both. Eva, her brother Erich, ISK leader Willi Eichler, and other ISK members would form the ISK’s prewar headquarters in exile in Paris.1

One historical account of the formation of the ISK’s Paris headquarters simply states: “In November 1933, [Willi] Eichler fled to Saarland and a month later from there further to Paris, where he built up ISK’s exile center.”2 The formation of the ISK’s headquarters in Paris, however, was far more complicated than that. Difficult groundwork had to be laid well before Eichler’s arrival in Paris in November 1933.

Eva arrived in Paris in the early summer of 1933. The first task for her, as for all refugees, was “somehow to eke out an existence, to make a living no matter how modest.”3 Eva could speak French well and was able to find work quickly at the office of a German-language literary and political publisher, Éditions Nouvelles Internationales, that had been well known in Germany before Hitler. Not long after she arrived in Paris, she made contact with Erich and Herta, who were in Switzerland with their young son Theo, but could not remain there because Switzerland strictly prohibited the employment of aliens.

While living in Zurich, Erich made plans to go to Paris and open a vegetarian restaurant. Without permits to work legally in Switzerland, he and his wife were able to earn some money from friends who were willing to employ them secretly on a temporary basis. They sought to learn what they could about the operation of vegetarian restaurants, observing the kitchen at the vegetarian sanatorium of Dr. Maximilian
Bircher-Benner, where Eva had restored her health after her emotional breakdown at the Walkemühle, and kitchens at other local Swiss vegetarian restaurants. Erich decided to ask his friend, a lawyer in Zurich named Dr. Rosenbaum, to lend him money to start a restaurant in Paris. But before he could request the loan, Dr. Rosenbaum directed his secretary to give Erich a check for 10,000 Swiss francs as a gift without conditions. Erich regarded the gift as a loan to be repaid. Erich and Herta arrived in Paris in August 1933. Erich spoke a little French; Herta not a word.4

Erich and Herta then made a wrenching personal decision: recognizing the demands and dangers of their commitment to the ISK’s anti-Nazi work in exile, they decided not to bring their seven-year-old son Theo with them to Paris. The ISK’s school at the Walkemühle had been shut down and confiscated by the Nazis, and ISK educator Minna Specht had decided to start another school in Denmark for students and other refugee children. After spending time in a children’s home in Switzerland, Theo was to attend this new school in Denmark as one of its first four students, from seven to nine years old. Theo later recalled that his mother came from Paris to Lille and joined him and the other three children on the train to his new school. He noted that she “accompanied us to Dunkirk, where she saw us off on the boat to Denmark the next day. My pleas to go back with her and to stay with them in Paris fell on deaf ears.”5 This decision would result in years of painful separation.

Erich’s wife Herta recalled that they found a good location for the restaurant, “a new office block” that had just been completed on the Boulevard Poissonnière, and decided to rent about three-quarters of the first floor. Herta noted that they “went to Galleries Lafayette . . . and bought cutlery, crockery, pots and pans, tablecloths and everything else that we thought we would need.” As they were setting up the restaurant, they got ideas for their menu from other restaurants by ordering different vegetables for each person: “When the meal was served, we all got beans, different kinds of beans of course. It was a good way to learn.”

As they prepared for the opening in October 1933, Herta urged Eva to give up her other job so she could help with the restaurant. Eva agreed. Others also joined the effort, including Eva’s brother Hans. As Herta recalled,

By October we were ready. We invited everyone we knew for a free meal on our opening night. There were many refugees and
many French friends as well. An Italian artist we knew drew a big poster for us.

“RESTAURANT VÉGÉTARIEN DES BOULEVARDS
après Bircher-Benner
28 BOULEVARD POISSONNIÈRE”

We employed a Sandwich Man to walk up and down the Boulevard with it.  

Eva was amazed at how the restaurant was inundated with customers from the outset:

Contrary to conservative estimations, our restaurant was immediately a success. People loved the food, the tasteful way in which it was served, the atmosphere of people gathering in some kind of warm relationship, French men and women as well as those now without nationality. And at the end of the first week, there were so many people wanting to get in and be seated that Erich had to rent more of the floor (it was a new building), had
the walls torn down, and continued to operate successfully for eight years, until war broke out.

It was a tremendous amount of work. . . . We all were cooks, and shoppers at les Halles (the central Paris market) where, in the early morning hours, you got the most beautiful produce. And we were also waiters when that was needed, or hostesses, or cashiers, especially those of us whose French was good.7

Another friend in Switzerland loaned Erich an additional 10,000 Swiss francs for improvements to the expanded space, without question or demand for any security for the loan. The restaurant was so successful financially that by January 1934, the gift and loans from Erich’s Swiss friends were repaid in full.8

In short, by the time ISK leader Willi Eichler arrived in Paris in November 1933, other ISK members, including Eva, Erich and Herta, had already laid the groundwork for the ISK’s headquarters in exile in Paris. This had been accomplished at substantial economic risk and sacrifice, with profits from the restaurant available to support the ISK’s work.9

Eva later reflected that the work in the restaurant had “something exhilarating” about it. “The restaurant was financially very successful, and the loans could be paid back within a few months. We each took only a very nominal salary for ourselves, and the surplus served to help the underground work in Germany.” But it was also physically demanding:

Due to overwork, Erich became very ill in the first year of our operation, and had to be hospitalized for many weeks with a severe case of pneumonia. Then I had to take over at the front desk. That is when and why I met Otto one night who had come to dinner with a group of young French students. I don’t forget that evening. I had hit a real low of sadness and loneliness that night; yet somehow, a spark between us two strangers lit up that was to become a lifelong association and love.10

During her initial years in Paris before she met Otto, Eva devoted virtually all of her time and effort to the ISK’s work against Nazism. On a personal and emotional level, these years were painful for her. In light of the unparalleled death and destruction that ultimately resulted from
Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, it is easy to overlook the impact of life in exile on those who, like Eva, escaped Germany in 1933, continued to fight against Nazism, and survived. The rise of Nazism and Eva’s commitment to fight against it irrevocably uprooted her from her homeland; foreclosed her from exploring and pursuing personal, artistic, and professional interests; and tore her from her family and her first serious love relationship.

While she was devoting herself fully to her work in Paris in 1933 and 1934, Eva agonized about the loss of her relationship with Rudi Lieske. She struggled to understand herself, revealing her deep desire to have a child, her need to be strong and fulfill her duty to her work, her love of nature, and her regrets about the personal losses suffered by her generation. She expressed these feelings in the diary she kept at that time with entries in the form of letters to Rudi, often marked “not sent.”

Eva later commented that before she met Otto, the years in Paris were perhaps the saddest of her life: “Rudi is far away; my love for him is still alive, but it gets no nourishment; the present is filled with hard work and little hope; the future is bleak. I start again questioning my life, where it has led me, and where it will take me. There are some friends with whom I spend many night hours in one of the Paris cafés, philosophizing, trying to help one another by listening and talking. But basically I am alone, and I write a lot.”

Eva sought relief from her sadness in music. In an entry in her Paris diary on April 13, 1934, she noted: “Now I am going to a concert—actually I am happy—music—from it the thoughts become free and soft.” But she could not escape the feeling of loneliness. “I need to find someone to whom I can give warmth and love, perhaps a very young person, a child . . .”

Eva wrote several poems in her Paris diary. She later explained: “Somehow it seemed to help the loneliness and agony of these years to write, and I started to express feelings in what very loosely might be called poetry.” One short poem, written on August 5, 1934, is titled “Blick durchs Fenster auf den Boulevard Poissonnière” (View through the Window to the Boulevard Poissonnière):

I look at the trees in the big loud street,
It is a hot summer day.
The leaves are still green, but dusty and brittle.
And when the wind brushes them, they fall,  
Tired, helpless, as in autumn.

And I look at myself.  
I am young. Why do I lack the strength?  
More and more often I am brushed by  
Sadness in my soul,  
And tears fall, unable to be held back.\textsuperscript{13}

Eva slowly grew to accept the end of her relationship with Rudi. In a diary entry dated August 16, 1934 (marked “not sent”), she wrote “Rudi, I watch with inner fear how we are coming apart.” She observed that her fate was to go her own way and noted that “the time we were together was very beautiful. Perhaps it therefore could not last.” She concluded:

I must go through everything alone. And the strangest: I am not at all so very sad about this development; it sits well that I come through alone. I am stronger and proud that I am now able to stand completely alone. Do you understand that? Can you do that too? You will experience it sooner or later. . . . And I wish you would go the same way in your development.

In late August/early September 1934, Eva was able to take a brief vacation from her work in Paris. She traveled alone by train to Saint-Malo, a small port city in Brittany in northwestern France.\textsuperscript{14} This vacation gave Eva more time to reflect on her separation from Rudi. It also gave her a rare opportunity to write, briefly relieved from the pressures
and responsibilities of her work and stimulated by the peace and calm of nature. In her diary entry to Rudi on August 29, Eva began with a description of the setting:

St. Malo is a small cure-town and also a fishing village. The rough rocks that appear in low tide interrupt the uniformity of the ocean. If one looks the other way inland, one sees a beautiful, soft meadowland with hills, many trees, all possible greens, streams, cow and sheep pastures, potato and vegetable fields. The houses lie like toy boxes scattered around; gray building stones, mostly with roofs of slate and sometimes straw. Not at all poor, but small and secluded. Other than green and gray and the blue of the sea that is sometimes fantastic, the landscape has no colors. But the effect is peaceful, almost cheerful.

In her diary entry on September 2, Eva expressed in a poem her desire to have a child and her belief that it would never happen:

Oh you my child, you unborn,
my heart constricts with pain,
whenever I must think of this great stillness
that you will continue to sleep in me forever
and I can never embrace you with my love.

It is not bad of me, my child,
that I do not give you life.
Sometimes I believe I could not endure it myself;
for my entire being presses me to you, my child,
in bitter unquenchable longing.

In her diary entry on September 6, 1934, Eva wrote a poem describing the landscape and the “gift” of her loneliness. Understanding how the calm of nature allowed her “to hear the quiet voices in me,” she ended the poem with trepidation about returning to work in Paris. And on September 8 as her vacation came to an end, Eva took a bus along the coast from Saint-Malo to Granville.15 In her diary entry on that day, she described that trip in a poem that ends:
The sky is like the clearest water, 
the clouds dark red-violet; 
at one place it is as if someone 
dipped a fine paintbrush in a cloud 
and drew the sky with a long, tired-swinging stroke.

The picture disappeared. 
One drives further into the deepening evening. 
It becomes even more still, peaceful and clear 
and one becomes so engrossed in this expanse, 
that there is only one wish: 
ever again to lose it.

Eva returned to Paris on September 9, 1934. In a diary entry to Rudi (marked “not sent”) written that day, she reported that she was “now on the way back to work after a wonderful, very peaceful vacation alone by the ocean.” The “calm and greatness of nature” made her happy:

At high tide, the waves strike up around the house . . . nothing to see except a great, great gray surface. At ebb tide, broad beautiful beach; out of the sea, rocks emerge everywhere, often in the most remarkable shapes. Lighthouses, ships, far in the distance a cape, above that the sky, sometimes gray and heavy, then radiant blue with small white clouds—always new and beautiful.

When it rained, and I walked for hours along the beach, climbed over rocks, saw no people, the feeling: I am in all this greatness completely alone—and feel gloriously free. When the sun shines and I swim and let myself be whipped and tossed by the waves, and see cheerful, healthy, tanned people, children—that is also beautiful. And when I don’t want to see the people, then I only go a few steps further, up on the dune meadows, and see nothing but ocean and sky. And the long nights with clear stars—it was hard to leave that.

The happiness from this vacation was short-lived. In her diary entry written in Paris on September 29, 1934, Eva spoke again of numbing loneliness, of a “remarkable twilight existence. . . . No great sadness, no
great joy, only great fatigue and the feeling, almost the wish: that everything would become completely still.” On New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1934, Eva asked in her diary what the future held for her—resigned to the fact that her work foreclosed the exploration of her interests:

Inclination to art, to writing—all very much in danger of being numbed. . . . It would be too bad if all of that were buried; for sometimes the conviction and wish are alive to be able to develop deep strengths that are dormant. Perhaps, if one would give me freedom, I would need to concede that these strengths are stunted dwarf plants not worthy of being matured. Perhaps. But why must I live in a time that does not allow me the possibility to give it a chance.

Eva expressed her desire: “Only once, to be alone in another city without assignment, without having to give direct account, responsible only for myself.” Yet she knew this was impossible because she could not abandon her commitment to continue the anti-Nazi work:

The work, which I am convinced must be done, should it remain hanging on the others? Again the old point, about which there can be no debate. For the others do not leave the work. They can’t. Just as I have not been able to do it to date. I believe that my life will remain stuck with this point, and I will, to be sure, not die as a fulfilled person at peace with herself. I will not create any positive works, but I will at least not have damaged my duty.

In her diary entry on January 1, 1935, Eva reflected further on the experiences of her generation: “A person needs calm to develop. My, our generation’s misfortune is that it did not have time to mature. I have experienced a lot, and some deep and harsh.”

In her diary entry on February 3, 1935, Eva revealed again her desire for a close relationship:

I have such a longing for a person who is there for me. This person does not come. Whether it will take a long time for me to wait for him, that I desperately look for him from time to
time? One always says that one gets calmer and clearer over the years. Until now, my development has gone exactly in the opposite direction. For everything that earlier appeared obvious and settled forever, begins to waver and must be struggled with again. That is often terribly difficult.

Also to sit here—I am so tired. Human conversation rustles around me, all somehow connected. They look right through me as if I were air.

This was the inner world of that “strange, sad, shy girl” who was looking for the sign of a human being on the night she met Otto at the Restaurant Végétarien des Boulevards in 1935.