Eva and Otto
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8. War Begins: Internment, Sabotage, and Love

On August 23, 1939, Hitler entered into a nonaggression pact with Russia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The pact provided that Germany and Russia would not attack each other for the next ten years. From Hitler’s perspective, this meant that if Germany attacked Poland, causing Britain and France to declare war against Germany, Russia would not enter the war and open an Eastern Front against Germany. On September 1, 1939, one week after signing the pact with Russia, Nazi troops invaded Poland. France and England declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, marking the beginning of World War II.

Very little overt military action took place on Germany’s Western Front during the first six months of the war, the period referred to as the Drôle de Guerre (Phony War). But the declaration of war had an immediate impact on Otto and Eva. Eva recalled:

Within France, things changed rapidly, especially for the refugees. At first, it hit only the men: all were put into internment camps, as potentially dangerous “enemy aliens.” Without any screening as to their loyalty, all had to report, including all our friends, and of course also Erich and Otto.¹

Otto was interned by the French first in St. Jean de la Ruelle near Orléans, about ninety miles southwest of Paris, and then in Camp Cepoy, about a hundred miles southeast of Paris, until he was released at the beginning of February 1940 to assist France in the war against Germany. Otto’s internment began what would become a pattern compelled by wartime events that separated him and Eva: exchanging letters to convey their
thoughts, love, and support. Eva retained some of the letters she wrote to Otto during this period. They were written in French and in German, sometimes using both languages in the same letter. Otto also wrote to Eva, but his letters from this period were not preserved.

On September 10 shortly after Otto was interned, Eva wrote to him in French, assuring him: “Be calm, I will too, I will not lose courage; little by little I get used to the new way of life, the nerves adapt as well.” She noted that late one evening she “even had enough strength to arrange our vacation photos. . . . How beautiful it was, the purity of the Bréda Valley! Almost unimaginable that it was scarcely three weeks ago that we stayed down there!” She informed Otto that his other letters had not yet arrived and that she was trying to get permission to send him a package: “Your pullover, I still haven’t been able to get permission to send it. . . . I will send you another in its place that, while not very beautiful, will be useful for you.”

On December 23, 1939, while Otto was still interned at St. Jean de la Ruelle, Eva wrote to him in French with two paragraphs in German. She attached a small fern leaf at the beginning of the letter that remains attached to the fragile paper over three-quarters of a century later. Eva erased some of the names from the original, apparently to protect the identities of their colleagues. After thanking Otto for his “beautiful, beautiful letter and card of the 20th,” she noted that “there wasn’t much Christmas spirit during this last year; but nevertheless tomorrow evening we will have our friends with us; [name erased] who is here. . . . He will
tell us some of his impressions; he is otherwise in good form and of good morale although personally he really has had bad luck: About a week ago, his friend was taken to a concentration camp—no one knows why.” She ended the letter with

Voilá, my dear young man, I must go. Don’t be sad tomorrow [Christmas Eve]; all of you know that we think of you with warm hearts and great sympathy, and are bound to all of you. All of you there, we here—the space divides us, but our way of seeing and shaping life binds us. No one can take that away from us. I hug you, from within and firmly, in great, great love.

First page of Eva’s letter to Otto on December 23, 1939, while Otto was interned by the French.
The next day, December 24, Eva wrote another letter to Otto before she was to join her ISK colleagues for Christmas Eve:

My dear, dearest Otto—How happy I am that all of you received the gift. How thankful for your good words and the beautiful wooden page! Now you are all probably sitting with each other and celebrating for a few hours, in which one is happy to be close to friends and wants to be good to them. We are doing the same. Tonight friends are coming to us. . . . We will read, make music, talk; each for ourselves will think very much about all of you, and all of us together will feel very close to all of you. . . . In the afternoon, a greeting came from [name erased, likely Stern] that was quiet, beautiful, deep: a letter and a small notebook full of new poems, full of melancholy and confidence. Good Otto, how I look forward to a quiet evening in which we could read in it together! Perhaps I will at some time send you one poem or another, but I just don’t have the right peace and quiet to do it today.²

On the whole, I would much rather talk the entire evening just with you—I feel so close to you. But that would be egotistical; and I am also, at bottom, happy again to be together with the others, because I feel so rich, basically, to get to live in this world despite great sadness at times, that I happily give in. For my riches, for the fact that I am at bottom deeply calm and happy, you my dear man are the decisive cause. Do you know that?

Now the others are just coming. Is your tree already beautifully lit? Many people think the same things in these hours, are moved by the same concerns, the same hopes; work at the same work. That gives courage. And that, in addition to this larger bond, we two still have each other, you me, I you, is so much that I am almost ashamed. Do you remember the evening in the Tuileries years ago where I said I was becoming religious? That is true, perhaps deeper and stronger, tonight.

Give best wishes to all, all friends; tell them that I and we all are close to all of you. You, my dear man, I hug in great, thankful love.
The end of one year and the beginning of a new one were special to Eva throughout her life. It was a time for her to reflect on the past and to look for hope in the future. In Eva’s letter to Otto dated December 30, 1939, while he was interned at Camp Cepoy, she again attached a few leaves, now dry and brittle, as fragile and faded as the ink and paper:

Otto, my dear man—Now it has again become so late, and my letter will not be more than a warm greeting. After a loud, turbulent day, quiet now gradually returns to us. I think about you, about the sky, snow and stars, and about the great love that binds me to you. Both of your greeting cards were like your warm, good hand that gently, tenderly strokes over my heart, when it is sad and hurts. Now it is happy and open, again capable of embracing much with love. . . .

You know, my Otto, what I wish for you and us for the New Year. You also know how I thank you for last year and for past years that, along with much heavy difficulty, brought back to me the most beautiful thing: the certainty that I am at home with you and you with me. Do you recognize these leaves? They bring to me the memories of beautiful deep hours coming back to life with you!

My two small gifts (socks and trousers) will make you happy. Something very nice will come soon! And now, my love, let me close my eyes for a moment and go with you in my thoughts to that mountain forest path through the high deep-green pines, through which the sun throws such a magical light that I would think I have never seen you so beautiful.

During this period of separation from Otto, Eva felt compelled to start a new diary to describe the development of her relationship with him. She wrote the first entry on January 15, 1940:

I really am not sure why I want to write about “our story” right now. I barely have time to write you the way I would want to. . . .

And yet there is the need to write this. Perhaps for fear that all the beautiful and hard things that happened to us may get
blurred because of all the events that rush in on us, that they may drown in the whirlwind of the new happenings? Or perhaps the desire to be close to you, to have alive before me the development of our relationship, the development of our love, your and my development, to get joy and strength from it.

There are two photos of you in front of me. In back of me is the drawing that someone made in camp. On the one, you are rowing forcefully, you look at me (I think it was me?) with love and tenderness. A picture of sunny serenity; when I look at it, I nod at you and tell you: “Yes, my dearest, I love you.” On the other one, you look with a frown, and with concentration, at something in front of you: a bug, a rock? . . . There I am quite excluded from your thinking, your whole attention is focused on the object in front of you. But there also you are close to me, and I feel the same love as to the tender, cheerful man. And in back, in the drawing, there is much, and much is missing.

There is above all the desire, the yearning, not to become small in front of hard things, to master the events, and, even with you away from me, still to remain close and keep serene. The same effort carries me along, far from you. Separated by wide spaces, we still move in the same direction. Perhaps our ships will have to continue their voyage for a while separately. Yet nothing can really part them.

In this diary entry, Eva recalled the depth of her loneliness at the time she met Otto: “I was suffering under the inner split in me: to be a woman, but not only a woman, a political human being, but not only that. I was afraid to continue my life in this halfway situation. Fear, discouragement, hopelessness—they defined me at that time.”

Eva’s writing in this diary about her early relationship with Otto paused at the end of January 1940.
when he was released from his internment and returned to live with her in Paris. She would resume this writing a few months later when Otto was again away from Paris on anti-Nazi missions to Belgium and Luxembourg that had become more dangerous now that France was at war with Germany.

Otto’s sabotage work against the Nazis

At the beginning of February 1940, the French released Otto from his internment because they understood that he could be of assistance in the war against Germany. Eva later explained that Otto and some of his colleagues were released “because of their willingness to continue to work against the Nazis—now that war was there, this had become a matter of first priority. So, Otto got out, and undertook travels to neighboring countries to take materials and information to be forwarded to friends in Germany.” Eva provided no further details about the nature of Otto’s “travels to neighboring countries.”

Another document describes Otto’s release from the French internment camp from a very different perspective. Two years later and long after the Nazis had occupied Paris, Otto’s oldest sister Rosa wrote from her home in Munich to German officials in an attempt to find out what had happened to her brother. Rosa and her sisters had heard nothing from Otto since before the war began. She received a one-page notice from the Deutsche Botschaft, Paris (German embassy in Paris) dated July 16, 1942:

Your brother Otto Pfister, born on April 8, 1900 in Munich, was interned at the beginning of the war in the camp “Cepoy.” He was committed on February 1, 1940 to entry in the French army and was thereupon released from his internment. About his current residence, a determination from here could not be found.

During this period of the Drôle de Guerre, the German Army was moving military supplies in preparation for its invasion, and the French Army was covertly engaged in defensive actions. Neither Otto nor Eva ever spoke or wrote about the specific nature of Otto’s underground work for the French Army during this period. In our research for this
book, we were shocked to learn that Otto’s work included his delivery of bombs to sabotage German trains and inland ships carrying war materials for the coming Nazi invasion.5

In these missions Otto worked closely with ISK member René Bertholet, a Swiss-born anti-Nazi resistance worker; Jef Rens, a Belgian labor leader; and Johannes (Hans) Jahn, a leader of the International Transport Workers Federation. Rens later wrote a book about his experiences during the war, originally published in Dutch and later translated into French.6 One chapter in the book is titled “René Bertholet et Otto Pfister.” The chapter describes encounters by Rens with Otto and Bertholet—encounters that Rens referred to as “among the most unique that I had in my life.”7 Rens described a visit from Bertholet in which Bertholet explained the ISK’s involvement in arranging the collaboration with the French Army:
After a brief moment of hesitation and after making me promise to keep this secret, he [Bertholet] began to speak: “The majority of the members of the ‘Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund’ have remained in Germany, but a certain number of others have immigrated to England and France. All of this has been decided by mutual agreement. The members who remained in Germany continued their propaganda and covert action against the regime.” “I,” said Bertholet, “I settled in Paris, as did Willi Eichler and other members of the organization.”

“Shortly after the entry into the war of France and England, we weighed the alternative courses of action to adopt in the new situation. Unanimously, we decided to offer our services to the French Authorities. After having studied various possibilities, we came to reach an agreement of collaboration with the Fifth Bureau of the French army.”

“In exchange for French passports created with aliases for some of us and paraphernalia for bombs, we committed to form small groups of determined and committed anti-Nazi activists in all the so-called neutral countries located around Germany. Some of these groups are already in action in Denmark, Holland, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. Only in Belgium have we not yet succeeded in creating one.” “I wonder,” Bertholet then said, “if you’re not the man we need to take the responsibility of such a group.”

“The activities of these small groups must, of course, remain secret, as they are incompatible with the laws and democratic rules in force in these neutral countries. The groups of our network, of whom some are active in the railway and as port workers, and if possible in customs, are responsible for planting timed bombs in the trains and inland ships that transport equipment for use in German war production.”

Rens described his first encounter with Otto:

Bertholet informed me of the arrival in less than a month, of a friend, a certain Otto, who would deliver me the bombs. . . . After the departure of Bertholet, weeks passed without receiving
news from the “Internationaler Sozialisticher Kampfbund.” I was ending up believing that this whole affair would come to an abrupt end when one beautiful morning, our secretary Mariette announced that “the citizen Otto” was in the waiting room. I let him in immediately. A true giant! I would barely come up to his shoulders. At the end of his arms . . . two large suitcases . . . visibly very heavy.

Otto began by listening attentively to the story I told him of my conversation with René Bertholet; then, without much movement, he opened one of his suitcases. It was full of the announced bombs, arranged with care next to each other, each composed of three distinct parts and . . . sparkling new. Without waiting, Otto explained to me how to assemble the elements of these infernal devices, and then how to operate the timing mechanism. He was careful to add that we had nothing to fear as long as the clock and the explosive charge remained separate. I was reassured!

For my guidance, I then asked him what was the destructive power of the contents of the two suitcases. With that, Otto gave a glance out the window and replied coolly: “There’s enough to blow into the air this entire neighborhood, including the Maison du Peuple and the church of la Chapelle.” A shudder ran through my spine. But without further ado, Otto took his leave and left me with “my” bombs. The drawers in my office were full. From then on, it is on a true small arsenal that I conduct my trade union business affairs!9

The previously secret files of the British intelligence agency during the war, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), contain a file titled “Operations of Johannes Jahn (1936–1940).” That file includes more information about this short-lived and largely unsuccessful effort to interrupt Hitler’s early war preparation through sabotage.10 A Bericht (report) written in German on November 22, 1940, noted that the success of these efforts had been limited because the “time to play it out was too short.”11 The report (translated here from German) stated:

From February until May [19]40, 27 railroad carloads from Belgium and Luxembourg were bombed. In March and April 1940, Rhine ships in Strassburg, Hohenfels, Rhenania 2,
Oberrhein and Duisburg were bombed. . . . The cargo was largely destroyed. The ships partially damaged. No ship was sunk.\textsuperscript{12}

The report further described in detail where the explosives were placed on the vehicles for maximum effect:

The explosives were attached directly behind the axle casing of a railroad car on the \textit{Stossene}nde [pushing end] of the axle and then set with the timing device. The left half of the axle was always taken, so that the expected derailing to the left would follow and thereby achieve an obstruction of the entire body of the track.\textsuperscript{13}

The SOE’s Jahn file also contains a brief memo dated May 8, 1940:

The following is an extract from a letter, intercepted in Censorship, dated 15.4.40. from the I.T.F. representative in Luxembourg to I.T.F. headquarters:

“During the past week a goods train between Aachen and Köln—120 axles—was completely blown into the air. What a good shot!”\textsuperscript{14}

Eva’s reflections on her relationship with Otto

On March 15, 1940, Eva returned to her diary to reflect on the growth of her love for Otto. She had not written anything in this diary for two months. But with Otto again away from Paris—this time on extended anti-Nazi missions involving serious risk to his life—she felt the need to look back in time and continue her written account of the early development of their relationship.

Two months have gone by. Good, that that could be, because the greatest part of it, you were with me; we lived together, and I did not have the urge to write about the past. Now I am alone again, the long evening hours and the night when it is hard to turn off the light, to sleep; there are the moments of the day, filled with longing, that cannot be forced into the
work program of the day. In the past, I could then write you a note, a letter. Today I can only be with you in my thoughts, lovingly. And when calm finally comes, perhaps after some music, I am writing.

It is in this diary entry on March 15, 1940, that Eva described for Otto her vivid recollection of their initial encounter five years earlier at the Restaurant Végétarien des Boulevards that is quoted in the prologue of this book—how she first noticed Otto while she was sitting at the cash register and how they immediately saw something special in each other.

Eva then described a miscommunication not long after their initial meeting—on her birthday in April 1936—that had nearly ended their relationship. She had opened up to Otto about her personal past in a vulnerable moment, and Otto misread that as an invitation to a more intimate emotional relationship than she was ready to accept:

You then came back very often; we talked a lot, discovered many things that we had in common, also things that separated us. One Sunday afternoon we went to St. Cloud. That was beautiful. Lovely was the return in the subway that was very crowded; I was sitting, you were standing next to me, your warm, trusting look rested on my face. I was grateful—perhaps my expression showed that to you?

My birthday came, a sad, heavy day. No letter from Rudi, not in the morning, not in the afternoon. At noon I see you. “What plans do you have for tonight?” “I would gladly go and have a cup of coffee with you after work.” In the evening, there is a letter from Rudi, but so empty that it makes me even sadder. My heart was so full on that evening, full of bitterness and loneliness, that I would have talked to a wall, to a piece of paper. You were there, and it talked out of me, towards you. You listened, calmly, and full of goodness; but I barely saw you. What did I tell you? I spoke of Nancy, I believe, of this first deep experience of my life, of my desire to have a child then, of my running away from the man, from me.

When I stopped talking, it seemed to me as though I came from another world. I felt not only me, and what I had lived through then; but I also felt your presence, you, the stranger to
whom I had just opened myself up. You had no idea of these complications; you did not know that in front of you sat a human being whose inner life threatened to overflow from having been held back so long. You did not interpret my talking to you as such an overflow, but rather as the gift of my trust in you. This trust, you felt you could best respond to by using the familiar form “Du” when you spoke to me.15

A thrust of cold water could not have made me come back to myself more. An inner panic was seizing me, and there was only one thought present: to never again have to see this person to whom I had shown myself, without shame, just never again. I begged you not to use the “Du” again, to let me go home, quickly, right away. You did not understand anything. I still see the sad look with which you said goodbye in the subway. Then I am finally alone, with a horrible sadness that I had destroyed the beginning of this friendship, that I had humiliated myself.

In her next diary entry on March 17, 1940, Eva described how Otto had insisted on an explanation:

To this day, I do not understand what made you stay with me. I had been so ugly, so unfair and cruel toward you—anyone else would have left me alone. When I think of all my evasions, of the unsparing way with which I derided your efforts to get close to me again, I am deeply ashamed. Your answer to these humiliations? One evening after work I hear steps behind me, long steps, a hand is put onto my shoulder, and you confront me with such a straightforward seriousness that demanded openness, that for the first time I listen again, I respect you, and I am ashamed.

You demand an explanation for my behavior. And I tell you what it looks like inside me, explain the explosion of my “confidences” the other night; talk of my love for Rudi, that I don’t want anything else, that, contrary to what you must have assumed, there is no love that ties me to you, perhaps a growing friendship, but that I was afraid that feelings of possessiveness would result from that, that you expect feelings from me that I cannot give. I feel that especially with this last statement I am
hurting you badly—how much, I understood only much later. But you seem to understand some of what is going on inside me. Because, after everything has been said, you don’t leave; you keep walking alongside me. I am happy that you are there.

For a long time we walk silently in the streets, the Boulevards, to the Rondpoint des Champs Élysées. We sit under the trees in the Champs-Élysées. Silence is broken; we talk of the magazine, of ideas, and of people. Great, deep calm. You accompany me in the subway to the Porte St. Cloud. The warm handshake, the open regard when we say goodbye give courage and hope: now we can begin to build our friendship.

Eva’s March 17, 1940, diary entry went on to describe how her “dead” feelings became “more alive” when she first visited Otto’s workshop and when she went with him to Chevreuse, a village in a nature park south of Paris:

Friendship is all I want, but not more. And yet I cannot give very much; my feelings are dead; always the fear to do something which I cannot totally accept. You are infinitely good during that time, and I am grateful for your presence that does not ask for anything. In certain moments, more becomes alive in me: when I visit you the first time in your workshop, when you talk to me with love of the nature and life of wood. There I clearly feel that you are all one, that you stand by who you are and what you do. At that moment, I think I loved you. Or on our long evening walks, where we talked of our work, where you express without hesitation your respect for my work, where slowly, uncertainly, yet clearly, confidence floods into me, in my strength, in myself. Then also I loved you.

Yet, these were passing light points in me, not more. Then, two weeks later, our two-day excursion to Chevreuse. It was more that I let myself be persuaded than that I followed a desire of my own. Again the fear: In these two long days, in that night, will he ask more of me than I am willing to give? In the dormitory, together with many other people, our beds stand next to each other. I’d just as soon go home. There, while I am still debating, you already have your swim trunks on, are at the
door, call to me to meet you at the pool, the path is right along the house. Relieved, infinitely grateful, I changed clothes. Then into the water, we eat, we walk along a path up the hill into the green starlit night—the great freedom, purity and stillness penetrate me solemnly. We don’t talk much. Down in the dorm, it is dark, everything is asleep; quickly, unseen by anyone, I get into bed. And as I am there, happy, for the first time the pressure falls away from me. And across the space that separates our two beds, I hold out my hand to you: “Good night!” In me is deep joy that you feel when you give yourself away.

Eva ended her March 17, 1940, diary entry with her recollection of another harsh outburst she had directed at Otto in Juvisy, a village located about eleven miles southeast of Paris, followed by a night they spent together there when they missed the last train back to Paris:

Now I loved you, not always admittedly, yet I did. But your “Frau” I had not yet become. Often we went to Juvisy, bathed our bodies in light, air and water. Once again, I was horrible. Perhaps you wanted to be good to me, perhaps you wanted to kiss me. I burst out, asking whether you really had not known that I would never really be able to love you, that it would always be Rudi. Quietly you walked away. Realizing what I was in the process of destroying, I asked you to please come back: “ Couldn’t we quietly talk about it?” You came, sat down next to me.

We talked. It was a beautiful, warm summer night. The sun was about to set, tall green bushes, no other human beings anywhere. We talked, and warmer and broader it came to me. We did not talk any more, or you said gentle words, in Italian, and your good hands, and your mouth, said more than words could do. We had forgotten the time. Then there was no longer a train—we had to spend the night there.

Again fear, unjustified distrust perhaps, and then a deep, pure night, next to one another, not yet united in body, but a unity in spirit. Another six months, and we took the last step. That was less decisive, tied me to you less deeply, than the handshake in the night in Chevreuse, than the night hours we were awake together in Juvisy.
On April 23, 1940, while Otto was again away from Paris on a mission just weeks before the Nazis launched their blitzkrieg toward Paris, Eva wrote a diary entry expressing her longing that they could be together in peaceful times:

A greeting only today; I am not relaxed enough to write. These last few weeks with all their upsetting events kept me so busy that there was no room and strength for quiet thought. Often in these warm, clear nights I wished you were near me; I would have wanted to sit with you, hand in hand, and look at the trees, sky, moon, and stars. But for that there would have to be peace. And you would have to be here. How far from reality are these two things!

On the table next to me, there is a single rose in a glass. It has tender forms, and a sweet aroma. I am thinking of you.

Parting at the train station in Paris on May 9, 1940

On May 9, 1940, Eva went with Otto to the train station in Paris as he departed to Luxembourg on a dangerous anti-Nazi mission involving Jef Rens. Eva recalled:

In the morning of May 9, 1940, I accompanied him to the railroad station, and he left for Luxembourg where he was to meet some important friends. During that night, the night of May 9/10, the war against the West became a reality: the German troops invaded the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France.

It was an unforgettable moment, the morning of May 9, 1940, at the train station in Paris. Eva and Otto said goodbye. They expected to see each other again in Paris when Otto was to return in a few days. Instead, they would not see each other again for a full year.