Eva and Otto

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12. Otto’s Return to Paris and Flight to Montauban

The day after Otto was released from the Nazi prison camp, he boarded a slow train to France with a dozen French prisoners of war from a nearby camp who were being sent to work at the railroads in Paris. But he managed to transfer to another train:

I had found out that our travel orders allowed us civilians to use faster trains. So, at a stopover in Hannover, we convinced the German non-commissioned man in charge to let us continue alone. This was very fortunate, since I was to report to the German authorities at the railway station in Paris and wanted to avoid that at all cost.

We traveled on without a guard, and at another stopover in Luxembourg, I picked up the suitcase that I had left at the hotel and then took the train to Paris. The problem now was to get off the train before it reached the Gare de l’Est in Paris. Fortunately, the train stopped at Le Bourget (one of the Paris airports), at the outskirts of Paris.1

Belgian labor leader Jef Rens, to whom Otto had delivered bombs during the Drôle de Guerre, provided additional details of Otto’s train trip back to Paris, as Otto later described it to him:

Before leaving the camp, Otto had to go to the commander to get his train ticket and Passierschein [safe conduct pass]. The commander almost apologized for his arrest and gave him five
hundred marks, saying “A gift from the Führer to compensate you for your unjustified arrest!”

In Hanover, his two guards told Otto that they had a 24-hour leave, and they would go visit their wives and children. They assumed that Otto himself had the desire to see his wife in Paris quickly, so they let him continue the journey alone, with his promise never to veer from the route. And so it was that Otto, activist German anti-Nazi, traveled alone by train between Hannover and Paris in the middle of the war, furnished with a safe conduct pass in perfect order, a free ticket, and five hundred marks in cash as a gift from Hitler.2

Otto got off the train at Le Bourget and checked his bags at the train station. After about an hour’s walk, he arrived at the house of a friend in Pantin, a town about nine miles from the center of Paris:

Nobody was home. I spent the night on the landing. Nobody came the next morning. Early then, I went to the house of a young French couple for whom I had made some furniture. They were my friends. But would they still be friends now, with the Nazis in Paris? It turned out that my fear was groundless: they heard my story, accepted me warmly, and helped me in every way, with money, food stamps, and shelter.

Otto then went to the Paris apartment of Eva’s brother Erich. The Gestapo had already entered and sealed the apartment, but the concierge knew Otto and gave him the keys. Otto was also able to get into Eva’s nearby apartment. “The next day, I loaded a two-wheel cart with whatever was worth salvaging from the two places, and I sold it later.”

A few weeks after his arrival in Paris, Otto learned from their colleague and friend, Gaby Cordier, about what had happened to others since the invasion on May 9. Gaby had been to the unoccupied zone and had returned to Paris. She told Otto that many of their colleagues, including Eva, Erich, and Herta, had managed to escape to Montauban in the unoccupied zone after getting out of internment camps.

Despite her friendship with Eva, Gaby also loved and admired Otto. Gaby’s interest in Otto had created some tension in the past when they were all working together in Paris, but it had been resolved. After his
return to Paris from the prison camp, however, Otto had a brief intimate relationship with Gaby despite his love for Eva. He would later express his deep regret about this to Eva, and her reaction would say much about Eva and her feelings about Otto and Gaby.

Gaby and Otto soon left Paris and headed south to join the others in Montauban. Gaby led the way to a crossing point she knew in the demarcation line. A farmer helped show them the way through a forest at night. As Otto recalled,

Dawn found us walking along a country road. Suddenly, out of the mist appeared two German soldiers. There was no way to escape. They questioned us. I kept mum, and Gaby did some fast talking. Incredibly, they let us go.

Once in the unoccupied zone, they took a train to Montauban. They were relieved to find their colleagues there, but Otto was crushed to hear that Eva had recently departed for the United States. He later observed that “at least, both of us now knew that the other one was alive!”

Even in the unoccupied zone, Otto’s life was in serious danger. Because the French government had agreed in the June 22, 1940, armistice to “surrender on demand” all Germans named by the German government in France, anyone who had been actively involved in anti-Nazi work was in imminent danger. If Otto were identified and turned over to the Nazis, he would be killed. And the woman he loved was now on a different continent with an ocean between them.

Several weeks later while Otto was in southern France and Eva was in New York, they were able to exchange letters. Writing to Eva from Marseille on November 8, 1940, Otto summarized his capture and release by the Nazis and his return to Paris in more detail:
My dearest, did you get my first letter from Montauban? And now I am here, and found with great joy your brother and his wife. How good it was to talk about so many things! I got right away your answer to his cable, and now we wait for your promised letter.

There are so many things to tell you that I really don’t know where to start and how far to go. You know: down there (at the Prisoner of War Camp) I never received anything from you, no letter, no package. I believe that at the first center where I was held, they probably did not know where I would be sent, and now I believe that was probably all to the good. So many times afterwards I had to force myself not to write you again; but reason spoke against it, and even now I believe it was better that I did not do it.

I had slept well that famous night [May 9, 1940, in Luxembourg] until 9 a.m., and barely heard the noise of the planes above. You imagine what I felt when the brutal fact of the invasion hit me. Once in the street, what a spectacle! I tried nevertheless to return [to Paris]; but it was too late, and quickly I was apprehended. From that moment on, I had to pull myself together and mobilize my resources. I knew that there was barely a chance that I could get out of the spot I was in. But I was unbelievably lucky, and that fact, supplemented by daily efforts which were guided by reason as well as by instinct, finally brought me to the point where one morning I was liberated. My return trip took me in the end to Paris, all alone.

You imagine my joy to see Paris again. I went right away to Jeanne—nobody home. But letters that I found there told me a number of things that had happened to you, and at least there was hope that you and the others were alive. From there, I went to #5 [the apartment they shared in Issy de Moulineaux, a Paris suburb], where the concierge was very nice. I was surprised that nothing had been touched, and that nobody had been there—that took care of a great deal of worries.

I did immediately the things that were most urgent, and there was so much to do that I missed by ten minutes the date with Josy [a mutual friend] I had set over the phone earlier. I nevertheless go to her place—nobody there. It is late. I sleep in
the staircase because it is forbidden to be outside at night—curfew. At dawn, near les Halles, I look for J’s truck—nothing. Then I remember that Henriette and Victor [a young couple, trade unionists] lived close by. They welcomed me in friendship, gave me lodging with Henriette’s mother, and invited me to eat with them until I would find a better solution.

My good luck continues. Victor [an ISK colleague] lends me some money; both of them help me to move the things from #5, from where, despite the difficulties, I was able to take almost everything. Later, the brother of Bravi [Maurice Abravanel, a well-known orchestra conductor and friend] also removed his piano. Our friend from St. Denis was great also; with his help, seven bags of books and other things were moved.³

Otto then expressed his anguish about learning of Eva’s departure and his gratitude for the “little booklet”—the diary Eva had written “to him” following their separation on May 9, 1940, and left for him with her brother in Marseille:

Paulette [mutual friend] arrives. She has to leave right away, but brings news of a letter from you from Lisbon. I had accepted that; my reason had accepted this solution. But it took some time to overcome the sadness and bitterness in me against the irony of the fate that had permitted me to escape successfully, only a month or six weeks too late to still see you before you left. Finally, we find a way, rather expensive, to pass across the line of demarcation; it was not without danger, but all went well again, and we arrived, all in one piece, in Montauban. It felt good to find all our friends in good shape. And you, my dearest, did not seem too far away; you lived with me in your little booklet that I read and reread—how you must have suffered!⁴