Eva and Otto

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13. Eva’s Escape over the Pyrenees and Unexpected Delay in Lisbon

Eva had traveled by train from Marseille to Banyuls sur Mer with three colleagues on September 19, 1940. Banyuls is a small fishing village at the foot of the Pyrenees on the border between France and Spain. Eva was with Stern, Hans Jahn (who had engaged in anti-Nazi work with Otto and lived in Luxembourg), and a woman named Irma (last name unknown).

Having left her diary in Marseille, with its entries covering the period beginning with her internment in the Vel’ d’Hiv and Gurs until her departure from Marseille, Eva started another diary in Lisbon. In her first entry on September 28, she sketched her recollection of her arrival in Banyuls: “Friday morning [September 20], Banyuls, visit with the mayor who shows us the path we will have to take in the morning. The ocean, the beautiful, poor little fishing village. Great desire not to have to leave.”

The mayor of Banyuls, Victor Azema, like the mayor of Montauban, was committed to helping political refugees. Eva later recalled the guidance she received from him and the dangers of the crossing:

[He] said to carry nothing, just maybe a little satchel with a sandwich and a piece of fruit so it looked, if anybody stopped us, as though we’d just be on a hike. He told us to follow the vineyard workers. They would know that we would be following them, but we would not communicate with them.

We constantly received news about people who had done it, and the regulations changed from day to day. It was very dangerous to travel through Spain in our condition, and often
they would just hand people over to Germany. . . . We wanted to just get this over with as soon as we possibly could . . . so we didn’t stay there [in Banyuls]. I would have loved to stay because it was so peaceful, and I thought if I should ever have a chance to see Otto again I’d have a better chance there than all the way across the ocean. But that was not to be.1

In a letter Eva later wrote to Otto on March 24, 1941, when she was in New York and he was still in Europe, Eva described the night before she left to cross the Pyrenees:

I have to think again and again of the night before we had to take off early in the morning. We were staying in a small hotel, with a view of the ocean, Irma and I in one room, Stern and Jahn in the room next to us. For a long time I was standing on the balcony that night, looked at the ocean and the serene sky, this beautiful country, and remembered all the good people that we had seen during the day; and I just did not want to leave, because my heart was waiting for you in this country, because part of my heart remained in you and in this country. How sad I was that night, how alone in spite of the three people near me.

Eva and the three others left Banyuls on foot on September 21, 1940. In her Lisbon diary entry on September 28, 1940, she described the crossing:

Very early the next morning, before dawn, we leave, following the silent French workers who are out to pick grapes, follow them on a six hour long hike, climb, through vineyards and rocks and mountains, and fog. On top of the mountain a quiet handshake, thanks, and farewell. Now the fog rolls in for real, we are on our own, and are totally lost, don’t know in which direction is Spain or France. Then, after a long while, we hear the whistle of a train. And suddenly we are oriented, know where the coastline is, and where we are headed. Then we see an old woman with a donkey coming our way. She understands our Spanish “Buenos días”—and we are safe.
Eva later described this disorientation in the fog as a “strange feeling of blindness, of helplessness, nobody to turn to.” She added: “The rest was relatively easy—the Spanish border officer gave us our entrance stamp without consulting any Nazi lists (something they had done in other cases).”

Eva’s safe crossing into Spain on September 21, 1940, was hardly ensured. The illegal escape over the Pyrenees by foot was challenging physically and psychologically. Moreover, Spain’s willingness to grant entry was changing day by day. Eva later reported to ISK leader Willi Eichler that Willi Rieloff was unsuccessful in his attempt to cross the border three days after her crossing because “a few days earlier new rules had been issued saying that people without a regular national passport could no longer cross Spain; up to then, the American visa itself had been recognized in lieu of a passport, and transit visa had been affixed to it.” She further reported that Rieloff was again in Marseille waiting for some intervention and noted that the danger of new internment was “menacing” because Marseille was now under German control.

Less than a week after Eva’s escape, German philosopher Walter Benjamin was arrested at the Spanish border after crossing the Pyrenees. He committed suicide on September 27, 1940, rather than be turned over to the Nazis.

Other political refugees who had been granted U.S. visas at around the same time as Eva, such as Rudolf Breitscheid and Rudolf Hilferding, leading members of the German Social Democratic Party during the Weimar Republic, delayed attempting their illegal escapes from France with the hope that they would obtain legal exit visas—until it was too late. They were arrested by the Vichy government and turned over to the Nazis. Hilferding committed suicide while imprisoned by the Nazis in La Santé prison in Paris. Breitscheid perished while a prisoner in Buchenwald shortly before the end of the war.

Eva and the three others arrived in Port Bou, the Spanish border town at the foot of the Pyrenees, at the end of a long and strenuous day. In her diary entry on September 28, Eva briefly sketched her impressions of Port Bou and their train trips to Barcelona and Madrid.

We are in Port-Bou—custom formalities, the police. No problems. Shocking impression of the ruins that had not been cleaned.
up, that the Civil War had left behind; burnt out houses; on the other side the ocean, mountains, and sky. Falangist youth in uniform; beautiful colors, blue and red, march, accompanied by military music, to the church from where one sees ruins and the ocean. At the same time, at the ocean, two young fellows take off their clothes, stand there with their slim brown bodies, dive into the water. When we ask them whether they don’t all have to march to church, one answers: “Only those who sign up for it!”

Port-Bou—Europe, September 1940.

Sunday, 21st, off to Barcelona. Misfortune and bad luck and tension among us because of the baggage left behind. Gratitude for the natural help of Enoch (friend of Erich’s). Walk through the streets at night, sadness, tension . . . attempt to clear up misunderstandings, all in a well-lit, wealthy street. Suddenly, on the sidewalk, an emaciated pregnant woman, with two children holding on to her skirt. Pale, starved—Europe 1940.

The next two days all sorts of errands because of lost baggage, unpleasant days and hours. Finally, Tuesday night, with baggage on train to Madrid. An ugly voyage, with beautiful people. A priest from a Mission, a young worker who makes one think of the Loyalist survivors of the war in Montauban. Resting in Madrid, a nice room, with beautiful view of city.

Eva later recalled, “In Madrid, we didn’t even go to the Prado, we saw nothing, we just stayed in a hotel.”

The girl and I stayed in a room, and then the two men in another. Then we walked the streets, and I remember the horrible discrepancy between great wealth and absolutely awful poverty. The women with hanging breasts, standing there and begging with their children—just awful. We wanted to get out of there. So we did.

In her diary entry on September 28, Eva briefly described the journey from Madrid to Lisbon: “A long trip, arrive at Portuguese border Thursday morning. Beautiful, simple people, a donkey, a Don Quixote, desert of rocks and of olive trees—finally peace.”
Lisbon: reuniting with friends, impressions of the city

Eva's four-month journey between her internment at the Vel'd'Hiv in early May 1940 and her arrival in Lisbon in late September had been filled with sadness, danger, strenuous work, and loneliness after being separated from the man she loved. Throughout it all, however, her diaries reflect some hope for the future.

That hope was challenged when she reached Lisbon and faced the ocean she was to cross to another continent—to a strange place where she feared she would never be reunited with Otto. In the final segment of her diary entry on September 28, Eva wrote:

It is great to see many friends, Lene, Marianne, Oskar [Austrian socialist]. Great sadness with increasing exhaustion. Departure for the States in perhaps four days. Today, Saturday night, for the first time again a half hour alone with Stern; then one hour quite alone. . . . I really would like to be alone more often; I have to practice that. Life will be hard in this great loneliness; but I am going to try.

In an entry written on October 7 while aboard the Nea Hellas, the ship that was taking her to the United States, Eva further reflected on her time in Lisbon:

The days in Lisbon were so strangely unreal. Suddenly, without any transition, to be able to move freely, without legal documents and yet without concern, pass by policemen, sit in cafés; to talk without fear in the language that just comes to mind. Brilliantly lit streets deep into the night; rich displays in store windows; newspapers in all languages, of any orientation; and books, books—

When one is standing at the harbor, at the large, strange square in the middle of which the statue of some king is riding on his horse towards the water; when one is sitting in the Botanical Garden, under these gigantic trees that don't seem to have any human dimensions—what does this giant
willow have in common with the gentle trees along the river at Compiegne—those immense palms . . . those tall, wild succulents—then one realizes that one stands at the edge of Europe, that in reality one has already left it behind.

Then, not far from the main streets, the Alfama (an area in Lisbon), barely ten minutes away, with its indescribable misery, dirt, and horror. That children are being born there . . . bodies covered with eczema, little legs like brittle sticks, without any flesh on them, dressed in some poor rags which barely give protection against heat or cold; that people are living there and get old, in dark hovels into which never a ray of light enters, with open wounds and protruding bellies, and covered with dirt—that all this can exist today—one must never forget it.

In the face of this misery, Eva described in this diary entry what she saw as the inner beauty of these people. She related a romantic fantasy about how she and Otto might take some of these people into the home she was still able to imagine might be theirs in the future:

And yet, how many beautiful human beings with a light in their eyes, with a barely conscious, and yet clearly noticeable yearning for a different world! The little fellow, like a cut out of a Murillo painting, with a large water jug, much too heavy, balanced on his head. I look at him, he smiles back, he replies to human warmth with warmth and serenity, and confidence.

I would like to take him with me, to the two of us. First put him in the tub, then give him some decent clothes; then sit him down at a clean dinner table. And then, when he would have eaten enough and would no longer be hungry, he would go with you into the workshop, where there would be many children, and he would learn to handle hammer and plane, and he would become a human being like you, secure in his work, and constantly finding new confirmation for what he is.

Or the woman, no longer young, who explains which way we will have to go, who firmly and friendly keeps on repeating the name of the street until we pronounce it accurately, people like her also would belong in our home. But above all you.
At the end of this entry, Eva returned to reality:

Well, let's leave this fantasizing alone. First, I'll have to have you again, first we have to have each other, before we can begin to plan our life. Also, all this is just piecemeal talk. The quarter about which I just wrote [the Alfama] is the only part of Lisbon that was not destroyed during the big earthquake. Without a social earthquake, such quarters will never disappear.

Unexpected obstacles to departure

In Eva's diary entry written on Tuesday, October 8, 1940, while on board the Nea Hellas, she explained to Otto how she was nearly precluded from boarding the ship because arrangements had not been made to pay for her trip. Having arrived in Lisbon on September 27, the day before the Nea Hellas was scheduled to depart, Eva was told that the departure date had been delayed and that the boat would now leave around October 3. The next morning, the refugee organizations in Lisbon checked her documents and advised her that “the Hicem would have to cable to America to make sure that my passage was paid for, but it probably was only a formality. We were told that we ourselves did not have anything to do with this . . . the representatives would take care of it for us all.”

HICEM was a Jewish organization formed through a merger in 1934 of three Jewish migration associations: HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), based in New York; ICA (Jewish Colonization Association), based in Paris; and Emigdirect, based in Berlin. After the German invasion in May 1940, HICEM’s European headquarters moved from Paris to Lisbon because Portugal was a neutral country with a neutral port in Lisbon, where refugees could be assisted in escaping from Europe. Eva confided to Otto that it was a relief for her to be told that the HICEM representatives would take care of making whatever contacts were necessary to ensure payment for her trip:

I feel free, really relieved that I do not have to do any of these errands. You know me: I am always reluctant and afraid to get in touch with people I don't know, to find my way in new, unfamiliar situations (the same way that each time I am afraid to
jump into the water, especially when you are not there. Once I have done it, I don’t do too badly in the water, and with new people). So I did some sightseeing in Lisbon, wrote some letters, did not go to any organization, with the pleasant feeling that one has when duty, and desires, coincide for once.

But the day before the ship’s planned departure, Eva received stunning news: “Suddenly, Tuesday night, when the others get their tickets, I am told that I am definitely canceled, because there had been no reply from America. Only at this moment it becomes clear to me that I had been in error thinking that Hicem would pay for my fare; in reality, I had to pay myself, and Hicem would only advance the necessary amount.” Eva noted with dismay, “Had I known this from the beginning, I would have taken the necessary steps with our American friends. Now, one day before embarking, it is too late for any effort beyond the perimeter of Lisbon. So I don’t expect any more that things will work out, yet don’t want to give up entirely.”

The “American friends” referred to by Eva were Anna Stein and Klara Deppe, ISK members who had immigrated to America in September 1938. There was no time left to contact them about trying to arrange payment for her trip. Eva had no choice but to do whatever she could to find a quick solution in Lisbon:

And so I decide to go to Hicem myself the next morning, to explain the situation, to guarantee the repayment of the fare, and to ask Oscar (one of the leading Social Democrats from Austria) to give a formal voucher for me from his group if that should be necessary. Oscar is very friendly and helpful, goes with me to Hicem. There I discover that the main secretary on whom much of the decision depends had been at our house in Paris. . . . What a pity that I find this out only now! Three days earlier, a short talk with this girl, and she surely would have helped me arrange things. Now, however, everything is too late. The lists are definitely closed, our names are canceled because there had been no reply from America.

Eva began to accept that she would not be able to leave on this boat. “Now all is finished. I begin to plan for the new situation, to cable to
Strange: although it is so very difficult for me to leave Europe because that would make it so much harder to see you again. I don’t want to stay in Lisbon, am absolutely at odds with the way things have developed. In the afternoon, once more a meeting with the Austrian friends, at 4:30, in a café. All are honestly indignant about the fact I have to stay behind.

At 4:45 Oscar arrives saying that he urgently had to talk with me. He had once more tried everything humanly possible at Hicem, and against all his expectations, he obtained this result: if by 5 p.m. I can put the necessary sum for the fare—$175—on the table, then the cashier would go with me to the Greek Line and try his best for me. But where can I get $175 within ten minutes? “Perhaps someone could lend it to you,” says Oscar. “Can you send a cable tonight that the borrowed money would be sent by cable here?” “Yes.” “Well, good, wait a moment.” He talks to Katia (Friedrich Adler’s wife), he leaves; in less than five minutes he is back with $200 in his hand from Friedrich Adler, whom he meets by chance in the street.

This fortuitous help from Friedrich Adler, a well-known Austrian scholar and trade union leader who was also seeking to escape to America, kept the door open for Eva. Another coincidental encounter provided a bit more hope but resulted in disappointment:

I go by taxi to Hicem, to the cashier who is willing to come along to the Greek Line, although not very friendly about it. Somehow, I think I know him, for a moment it seems to me that he could be Erich G (one of my former co-students from college); but no, that cannot be, this one is smaller, younger, different. But his hairline, his voice, the shape of his head—amazing. While we wait for a cab in the street, I ask him, without believing in it, if he is perhaps a brother of Erich’s. And in fact
that is who he is, and now he is much more interested in my case, as he realizes that I really know his brother well.

He now pleads with the Director of the Greek Line, as though it were his own case. Ten minutes intense waiting while he talks with the Director. Then he comes back, and we only hear the last words: “But you cannot demand the impossible from me.” I realize that now everything is really over, because it is too late. During the last 24 hours, nothing had been neglected; from the part of many people everything had been done, much more than I had a right to expect. Now it definitely is all over.

Eva dreaded having to wait four weeks for passage on the next ship:

The next morning, I spend a few hours in the Botanical Garden; a quick farewell to St. [Stern], then a walk to the boat, see many friends, say a very sad farewell. I walk back a short way with Marianne whom I like more and more. Then I leave to where I am going to stay now. I feel totally empty, exhausted, start to read something, begin a letter to Erich. When the lady at whose house I stay now comes home, we eat, listen to the radio. I am so tired that I can’t do anything anymore, and just go to bed very early. The four weeks in Lisbon are looming ahead of me, like an insurmountable mountain. I sleep, heavily.

Eva’s exhausted resignation did not last:

The next morning, I make my plans for the day: write, go again to the boat, to Hicem, study English. I begin to write. The telephone rings—I am wanted. A hope that I did not want to admit to myself flares up when I hear the ringing of the phone—now it becomes somewhat stronger. On the other end of the line is Marianne: “Eva, you better sit down: You can go! Be at the Hicem at 11 a.m. with your luggage.” And now begins a strange back and forth which ends with my really boarding the ship at 8 p.m.

The explanation: in the morning, the awaited cable had arrived, but without my name. Since the secretary now knew
who I was, and since Oscar also vouched for me, the Hicem included me in their efforts: the fact was that another month’s stay in Lisbon would be very costly for Hicem, and they would not be reimbursed for this, while the fare for the trip was without any financial risk.

But now the officers of the Greek Line did not want us anymore. Thereupon, the Hicem, through one of their high-ranking people, got in touch with the Portuguese police who informed the Greek Line that the police would have to refuse me permission to stay in Portugal, and for that action, the Greek Line, also foreigners, would be held responsible, because there was no factual reason why I could not get on the boat. This “ultima ratio” made the Greek Line give in, and so, for the first time in my life, upon leaving Europe, the police intervened in my favor!

Eva’s close call was reflected in a list attached to a letter dated October 11, 1940, from Isaiah Minkoff, executive secretary of the Jewish Labor Committee, to Joseph Savoretti, the acting district director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at Ellis Island. Minkoff informed Savoretti that he was enclosing “the corrected list of our friends who are expected to arrive on the Nea Hellas Sunday, October 13.” He added: “This list includes a couple of additional names.” Eva’s name had been written in by hand at the bottom of the typewritten list.14

Eva departed for America on October 3, 1940.