Part V.

New York, 1940–1941: Urgent Efforts to Rescue ISK Colleagues, including Otto

—I am glad to vouch for the fine character of Eva Lewinski and to declare my belief that the statements she makes about Otto Pfister are true.

—Letter from Dorothy Hill to the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees on October 28, 1940

—I have been to Washington. . . . I have tried to present your case with the full strength of my convictions, and not without some success I would think. You see, Otto, that I am being diligent. And I also have hope.

—Eva’s letter to Otto on New Year’s Eve, 1940
15. Eva’s Daunting Task of Obtaining U.S. Visas

When Eva arrived in America on board the *Nea Hellas* on October 13, 1940, she was surprised to see trees. She was convinced that there would be few trees in New York City. She later recalled that “Ellis Island was not a pleasant place,” and when asked if the Statue of Liberty was a dramatic sight, she said “no, not at all . . . I wasn’t happy to be there. I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t come out of my own free will.”¹ Eva further reflected on her escape to America: “It meant going to a completely uncertain new life, one that I really did not want. I went only because of *Pflichtgefühl* . . . only out of a feeling of duty, to help people. . . . I wanted to stay in Europe. Europe was my home.”²

The two ISK members who had immigrated to the United States before the war began, Dr. Anna Stein and Klara Deppe, had been Eva’s former teachers at the Walkemühle. Stein lived in Buffalo, New York, and Deppe lived in Cleveland, Ohio. Neither was able to come to New York City to meet Eva when she arrived.

Eva’s initial apartment at 52 W. 68th Street in New York was dramatically different than the lodgings she had shared with other refugees since her departure from Paris. “It was a little brownstone house where they rented furnished rooms; and from where I came—Vélodrome d’Hiver and the Camp de Gurs and Montauban cramped together—I had a room all for myself! That sounded like a paradise, but it was a junky room, and at night when I came home, the cockroaches were running up and down the wall. I had a tiny little sink with running water and a little two-burner stove. A chair.”³

Shortly after her arrival in New York, Eva contacted Maurice Abravanel, a well-known Jewish conductor of classical music. Eva and
Eva had become friends with Abravanel in Paris before Abravanel moved to America in 1936 to accept a post at New York’s Metropolitan Opera. When Eva told Abravanel about her task to seek visas for Erich and others who were still trapped in southern France, Abravanel gave Eva a small typewriter to help her with that task. Eva later described this special gift:

[Maurice Abravanel] was in New York; I had his address, and I called him. I knew him from Paris. He was a very close friend of Erich’s and he liked me too. He was very emotional. And he was a conductor. . . . He did all the Gershwin pieces. He was an important man and rich. . . . He had me come over and meet with him. And when he heard what I was going to do, he said, “Well, you need a typewriter. Here, take this typewriter.” He had a little Hermes Featherweight. My first typewriter.

On this typewriter, Eva would soon begin her urgent work of corresponding with all those involved in supporting applications for emergency visas. She would use this typewriter all her life.

Eva sent a brief letter, written in English, to ISK leader Willi Eichler on October 20. Eichler was then living and working in exile in Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire, about twenty-five miles north of London. Eva wrote, “Only a few words today to tell you that I arrived here . . . for the moment I am very busy to get visas for my friends who are still in F. [France].” She advised him that the task will be “terribly difficult,” and she did not know if she would be able to succeed: “We are very,
very late; but I try my best, and as I know a lot of people here I think it is not hopeless.” Eva also informed Eichler of the distressing news she had received in Montauban about Otto:

Did you get my letter from Lisbon? I hope so. So you will know that on the contrary of what you supposed in one of your letters, O. is in the hands of the Nazis; he is prisoner of war. I had no other news from him than just the fact of his prisonership.

Eva wasted no time in turning to her task. The first step was a trip to Buffalo to meet with Anna Stein—a week after her arrival in America—to make initial contacts with American citizens and organizations that might assist in rescuing their endangered colleagues. When she returned from that trip, Eva received the first news about Otto since she had learned in Montauban that he was in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp:

As I came home tonight, exhausted, there on the table is a telegram, some notes, mail. I open the cable: You are in Paris! Oh, I don’t know what to do with my heart. Should really everything turn out well, should we be able to get together again, to live with each other?6

Eva would wait many months for answers.

Eva’s unlikely visa: a special “visa list” process

In order to understand the challenges that Eva faced in seeking U.S. visas for her ISK colleagues, one must first look back and examine another important question that Eva sought to answer shortly after her arrival in New York: How had she, a relatively unknown political refugee, managed to obtain her U.S. visa when she was in Montauban in the fall of 1940? Eva was virtually unknown to any Americans. She knew then—and throughout her life—that she had been extraordinarily lucky to receive a U.S. visa. She later became intimately and painfully aware of the multitude of Jews and political opponents of Hitler who were denied refuge in America and lost their lives in the Holocaust. Who were the individuals and groups responsible for allowing her entry
into the United States, where she could survive and help rescue others, including Otto?

Congress had established restrictive immigration quotas in the 1920s because of fears about the adverse impact of immigration on American society and the U.S. economy. The Great Depression and the outbreak of World War II, accompanied by widespread anti-Semitism and rumors of foreign spies, fanned the flames of popular anti-immigration sentiment and contributed to official resistance to the granting of U.S. visas. American consulates found ways to restrict immigration, so the quota limitations were not even approached.7

With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, it had become apparent to some individuals and organizations in America that extraordinary measures would be necessary to rescue political opponents of Hitler who were in exile in Europe. The two American organizations with the most crucial roles in initiating a special visa list process that ultimately resulted in the issuance of an emergency visa to Eva were the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).8

On February 28, 1940, the president of the AFL, William Green, and the secretary-treasurer of the AFL, George Meany, wrote to officers of national and international labor unions. They explained that the old German labor movement had been “attacked and wiped out when Dictator Hitler gained control of the German Government.” Green and Meany urged American unions to support their endangered labor colleagues in Europe.9

Following the German invasion of France in May 1940, the European socialist and labor leaders who were now trapped in the unoccupied area of southern France were in imminent danger of capture by the Nazis. On July 2, 1940, a delegation of American labor leaders, headed by Green, and the JLC, headed by its executive secretary, Isaiah Minkoff, met with Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long and hand-delivered to Long a letter addressed to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. The letter urged Hull to make it possible for a group of “men and women prominent in the democratic and labor movements in Europe” to find “immediate temporary haven” in the United States. The delegation met with Hull shortly after the meeting with Long.10

Hull was convinced by this delegation that a limited number of prominent refugees in the labor movement in Europe, on lists that were
recommended by the AFL and the JLC, should be permitted to enter the United States on visitors’ visas. It appears that Hull then consulted with President Franklin Roosevelt after meeting with the delegation and that Roosevelt signaled his approval of AFL president Green’s request to help these endangered European labor leaders.11

Even Breckinridge Long supported this unique rescue effort. Much has been written about Long’s resistance to the immigration of Jews and political refugees at this crucial time in history. Among other things, Long had initially praised the Italian fascist regime when he was U.S. ambassador to Italy, his diary suggests that he was prejudiced against East European Jews, and his record at the State Department confirms that he was more concerned about preventing “undesirables” from entering the United States than trying to save innocent political refugees and Jews who were threatened by Hitler.12 However, Long agreed with this request by the JLC and the AFL to adopt this special rescue process for members of the European labor movement.

On July 3, 1940, Green wrote a letter to Long thanking him for the opportunity to present to him “the tragic plight of our refugee friends in Europe.” Green confirmed that the JLC would present a list of names “of those who we earnestly request be accorded governmental visas in order that they might come to the United States as visitors. Such action will, no doubt, result in saving the lives of many, if not all of them.” Green assured Long that the individuals on the list had been carefully vetted: “We have prepared this list with scrupulous care and are prepared to vouch for each one whose name appears on this list.”13 On the same day, Long confirmed that he had received the list from the JLC and assured Green that the State Department “has been glad to telegraph to the appropriate consular officers regarding the persons included in the list and has requested the consuls to give every consideration to their applications for visas.”14

In preparing these lifesaving lists, the JLC and AFL representatives in New York relied heavily on information provided by political refugees who had moved to New York during the 1930s. Leaders of several German-speaking socialist groups were well represented in New York City in this process, and each advocated for inclusion of endangered refugees from their own group.15 Many of the individuals initially selected by the JLC to be placed on these lists were not German-speaking political refugees. The JLC’s focus was on exiled Jewish members of the
labor movement, some of whom were Russians (Mensheviks), Poles, and Lithuanians who were endangered by the Soviet regime. However, the JLC did include a significant number of endangered Germans and Austrians.\(^{16}\) The first list of refugees from German-speaking countries, completed in Washington on the day that Hull agreed to provide visas, contained a total of eighty-eight names; the second German list, composed of Austrians, contained twenty-four names.\(^{17}\) These first two German lists included the names of prominent members of the German Social Democrat Party in exile.\(^{18}\) No ISK members were on these initial lists.

Based on cables from Europe, the JLC and the AFL determined that other participants in the anti-Nazi labor movement who were not on the initial lists were in extreme danger in unoccupied France. Fortunately for Eva, supplementary lists were made.\(^{19}\)

By telegram to the American consul in Marseille dated September 7, 1940, the State Department transmitted the third and last of the German lists. Eva’s name appears on the third page near the end of the telegram.\(^{20}\)

The U.S. consulate in Marseille issued the visa to Eva on September 16. A document with that date titled “Alien’s Registration Record” briefly outlined Eva’s background, noting that she had been a “journalist for different immigrant papers at Paris, and engaged in social welfare work” from 1935 to 1940, had never been arrested, and had been “interned in France during period 15th May–20th June, 1940, owing to German birth.” This document was signed by Eva and Hiram Bingham Jr.

Bingham served as vice consul at the U.S. consulate in Marseille from 1939 to 1941. He has been properly but belatedly recognized for his efforts in assisting endangered refugees to obtain visas to escape from southern France in 1940 and early 1941.\(^{21}\) Bingham’s superiors in the State Department, opposed to his efforts to facilitate the granting of such visas, later transferred him from Marseille to Lisbon and then to Buenos Aires. Shortly before his transfer from Marseille, Bingham would also play a role in the granting of a visa to Otto in February 1941.

When Eva arrived in America, she was only vaguely aware of this special visa list process. She desperately needed to understand the procedures that would be available for her to seek emergency visas for her ISK colleagues. She first tried to piece together what she had learned about the visa process while she was in Montauban back in the late summer
of 1940 with information she was able to obtain from other political refugees shortly after her arrival in New York City.

On November 2, 1940, two weeks after her arrival in New York, Eva sent a detailed letter to ISK leader Willi Eichler reporting on what she had learned. Because of concerns about confidentiality, Eva often used pseudonyms, abbreviations, or code words in this letter to identify individuals and groups.22 Eva reported to Eichler that while she and other ISK members had taken refuge in Montauban, they had sent lists to Anna Stein and Klara Deppe of the names of colleagues who were in
Alien Registration Record for Eva dated September 16, 1940, signed by Eva and Hiram Bingham Jr. in Marseille.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Name: Eva Lewinski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Proposed address in the United States: C/- Mr. M. B'Abbravanel, 11 Central Park West, New York City.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>No nationality — German refugee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Female sex, single, white race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>First visit to the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Length of expected stay in United States: 6 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Usual and previous occupation: Journalist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>During the years 1935-40, have been wholly occupied as journalist for different immigrant papers at Paris, and engaged in social welfare work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Have never applied for first citizenship papers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>No relations in the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Judicial record: never arrested. Interned in France during period 15th May—20th June, 1940, owing to German birth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature of Regrant: [Signature]

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 16th day of September, 1940.

[Signature]

Hiram Bingham Jr.
Vice Consul for United States of America.
15. Eva’s Daunting Task of Obtaining U.S. Visas

great danger and needed visas. Eva explained that the lists were in order of priority, considering not only the degree to which they were in danger but also their ability to do the necessary rescue work in America.23

Eva described the disappointing news they had initially received while they were in Montauban that no ISK members were on the initial visa lists. She explained to Eichler that the ISK group in Montauban had written again to Stein and Deppe, asking them to contact Joseph Buttinger, the leader of the Austrian socialists, and Karl Frank (aka Paul Hagen), head of the German socialist splinter group Neu Beginnen (New Beginning), who were then in New York City.24 Eva explained that the “decisive reason” why the ISK did not receive any visas on the initial lists was that the ISK did not have representatives in New York City who were familiar with the visa list process, noting that Anna Stein lived in Buffalo and Klara Deppe lived in Cleveland.25

Eva also informed Eichler that Joseph Buttinger, whom Eva had come to know in Paris, had been a key advocate for the addition of her name to the supplemental visa list. She reported, “Buttinger spoke up for me when my name was cabled from France; it was true that of our people in France he knew me best, and the others only barely.”

Buttinger had risen from a working-class background to become the leader of the Austrian socialists and of the anti-Nazi movement in Austria. Following the Anschluss (the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in March 1938) he fled to Paris, where he was chairman of the exiled Austrian socialists. When the Nazis invaded Poland and war was declared in Europe in September 1939, Buttinger and his wife and daughter had moved to the United States. It was in Paris, between the summer of 1938 and the autumn of 1939, when Buttinger came to know Eva through their participation in the group discussions among exiles from different anti-Nazi groups.26

The role of the Emergency Rescue Committee

Joseph Buttinger and his wife Muriel were also among the group of political refugees who helped establish the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) in New York shortly after Hitler’s invasion of France and the announcement of the terms of the armistice between Germany and France on June 22, 1940. That armistice included the notorious Article
19 requiring the French government to “surrender upon demand” the German opponents of Hitler in France. A few days later on June 25, the American Friends of German Freedom (which had been set up in 1936 by the eminent American theologian Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr) held a large fund-raising luncheon at the Hotel Commodore in New York. The ERC was formed at that time.

In addition to the lists of political refugees being prepared and submitted to the State Department by the JLC and the AFL, including the list with Eva’s name, the ERC created additional lists of endangered refugees. The ERC’s lists focused primarily on prominent European artists and writers whose lives were threatened by Hitler. These lists were prepared with input from such people as Thomas Mann, the renowned German author who had already immigrated to America, and Alfred H. Barr Jr., an art historian and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The ERC also decided that it needed to send a representative to Europe to assist with rescue efforts there. In mid-July 1940, Varian Fry was selected. The ERC arranged for him to travel to Lisbon via Dixie Clipper and then to go by train to Marseille.

Varian Fry has been recognized for his vital work with the ERC through the offices of the Centre Américain de Secours in Marseille. He was posthumously honored and named “Righteous Among Nations” by Israel’s Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in 1996 for his work in 1940–1941 in assisting with the rescue of approximately 2,000 of Europe’s artists, writers, and political refugees threatened by Hitler.

Fry’s involvement in Eva’s escape from southern France, however, was very limited. The most critical hurdle that Eva had to overcome in escaping from southern France was obtaining her U.S. visa, and Fry was not involved in that extraordinary process. In addition, shortly before Fry arrived in Marseille in August 1940, an American journalist, Dr. Frank Bohn, had been sent to Marseille by the German Labor Delegation. His mission, supported with funds raised by the JLC, was to assist those political refugees who were on the emergency visa lists approved by the JLC and the AFL with the logistics of their escape to America—including help with their living and traveling expenses.

Fry’s assignment to assist those on the ERC’s visa lists included coordinating with Bohn on the similar work that Bohn had been assigned to do for those on the JLC/AFL lists of political refugees. While in Marseille, Bohn claimed to be working on behalf of the AFL rather than
the JLC, presumably because he believed that this would enhance his authority.\textsuperscript{33} Eva’s brother Erich and other European anti-Nazi political leaders were also in Marseille in August 1940 when Fry arrived. They worked with Bohn, Fry, and others at the Centre Américain de Secours to assist with the escapes of these political refugees.\textsuperscript{34}

In his book \textit{Surrender on Demand}, Fry acknowledged his limited role with the early escapes of these political refugees:

Fortunately for me, the first of the refugees to come to the [Hotel] Splendide in response to my summons were Paul Hagen’s German socialist friends and some of the younger Austrian socialists. They were all young and vigorous and not at all lacking in courage. Most of them had already received American visas. All they needed, they said, was money. With enough money in their pockets for the trip to Lisbon, they would take their chances with the French and Spanish police and the Gestapo in Spain. They would get Portuguese and Spanish transit visas

Eva’s brother Erich Lewinski (\textit{second from left}) working with the ERC in Marseille in 1940–41. Others include (\textit{clockwise from Erich’s left}) Fritz Heine, Jaques Weisslitz, Daniel Bénédite, Heinz Ernst Oppenheimer, Hans Sahl, Marcel Chaminade, and Maurice Verzeau. \textsc{Courtesy of the Varian Fry Institute, Chambon Foundation.}
and go down to the frontier and cross over on foot. I gave them money and they went. All of them got to Lisbon. It was as simple as that.35

Eva fit into this category: the young, courageous political refugees with U.S. visas (issued on the basis of the JLC/AFL lists) who escaped over the Pyrenees shortly after Fry arrived in Marseille.

A return to tightly restrictive U.S. immigration policies

It is a tragedy that the expedited emergency visa list process to rescue politically active anti-Nazi refugees was so short-lived and that the term “political refugees” would not be more broadly defined to include Jews whose lives were threatened by Hitler solely because of their Jewish heritage. The record of decisions made by President Roosevelt and his administration about the rescue of refugees during World War II has been exhaustively examined, evaluated, reexamined, and reevaluated.36 In considering Roosevelt’s support of this early effort by the JLC and the AFL to rescue endangered members of the European labor movement, one must recognize a crucial fact: Roosevelt faced reelection on November 5, 1940, and he relied heavily on the continuing support of organized labor. He likely felt strong political pressure at that time to respond positively to the AFL and the JLC. Whatever the ultimate historical judgment, Roosevelt’s decision to support this visa list process for endangered political refugees was a bright spot in the tragic history of America’s response to the refugee crisis in Europe at the time. That process resulted in saving hundreds of lives, including Eva’s and those she would help rescue.

In her November 2, 1940, letter to Willi Eichler, Eva explained that when she and her group of ISK members were still in Montauban in the late summer of 1940, they had received word from exiled European socialists already in America that “the visa list action” was likely finished and would be replaced by careful scrutiny of individual applicants. She noted that visas “might be granted if for each individual case one could provide affidavits, political guaranties signed by Americans, and if one could bring proof of the endangerment of the individual in question.”

This reversion to the “normal” restrictive U.S. immigration policies and procedures is reflected in the diary entry of Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long in September 1940. Long explained that the
United States had been “very generous in offering hospitality” to groups including “a category of leaders in the labor movement in Europe who were recommended by . . . the American Federation of Labor.” However, he confirmed that these exceptional procedures needed to end.37

Even before the State Department had adopted the special visa list process that had benefited Eva, it had begun to tighten U.S. visa restrictions in telegrams to consuls in June 1940. Applicants were required to show not only a good reason for needing to leave Europe but also a legitimate purpose for entering the United States.38 And because of growing fears of German spies and communist radicals, State Department circulars to American consuls in Europe in June 1940 included directives to withhold visas unless the consuls had “no doubt whatsoever concerning the alien.”39

In seeking emergency visas for her ISK colleagues, Eva would also need the endorsement of each individual candidate by the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. The President’s Advisory Committee had been formed in 1938 following a conference in the White House on April 13, 1938, among interfaith leaders and President Roosevelt to discuss the current and potential plight of refugees in Europe.40 Following the Nazi invasion of France, the committee assumed the role of vetting applicants for emergency visas.41 However, U.S. officials took actions to constrain the committee’s rescue efforts.

In a now notorious secret memorandum sent on June 26, 1940, to State Department officials, James Dunn, and Adolf Berle Jr., Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long suggested that the State Department could “simply advis[e] our consuls” to engage in bureaucratic delay tactics to obstruct the granting of visas:

We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative advices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas.42

On October 9, less than a week before Eva’s arrival in America, James McDonald, chairman of the President’s Advisory Committee, arranged a meeting (through Eleanor Roosevelt) with President Roosevelt to challenge Long’s restrictive views about the rescue of refugees. Before
the meeting, however, Long had asked Roosevelt to read a lengthy cable from the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, Lawrence Steinhardt, that criticized the President’s Advisory Committee as undermining American security and urged a firmer State Department position against organizations that sponsored such emergency visas. Influenced by Steinhardt’s cable, the president expressed his approval of Long’s position that suspicious aliens should be excluded “no matter how prestigious their sponsors.”

Despite these security concerns, there was still some chance for refugees to obtain emergency visas. On October 18, five days after Eva’s arrival, an agreement was reached among top officials of the State Department and the Justice Department that the President’s Advisory Committee would continue to have the semiofficial status of recommending the issuance of emergency visas to intellectual and political refugees and persons who were in imminent danger. These discussions in October 1940 did not address the important question whether “political refugees” included Jews who were threatened by the Nazis simply because of their Jewish heritage. Not surprisingly, Long would seek to implement a narrow interpretation of “political refugees” as prominent individuals whose achievements or activities had antagonized the Nazis.

This was the U.S. immigration policy that Eva now confronted in her rescue efforts. Affidavits had to be submitted by individuals with personal knowledge of the applicant. Such affidavits would have to confirm that the applicant was in imminent danger of capture by the Nazis because of anti-Nazi activities, was not a communist or a member of any other revolutionary organization, and was sponsored by an American citizen who would guarantee that the applicant would not become a financial burden on the United States—backed up with sufficient proof of the sponsor’s financial resources. Precious few would be able to meet these vetting requirements.

Eva had been among the very last to be admitted to America through the door that had been opened by the JLC and the AFL for the expedited issuance of emergency visas to lists of endangered political refugees. That door had slammed shut even before Eva’s arrival in New York on the Nea
Hellas. It would be Eva’s challenge to gather the affidavits and American sponsors necessary to convince the President’s Advisory Committee to recommend the issuance of an emergency visa to each ISK colleague. Ultimately, the State Department would have to approve the visas, the U.S. consulate in Marseille would have to issue them, and each refugee would have to find a way to get to America—over the Pyrenees, through Spain and Lisbon as Eva had done, or by some other route.

This was a formidable challenge. Eva was a young woman, burdened by all that she had endured in her life, still learning English, separated by the Atlantic from the person she loved, virtually alone. Fortunately, Anna Stein had developed a relationship in Buffalo with a wonderful American woman, Dorothy Hill, who knew Eleanor Roosevelt. The first lady would be of vital help to Eva and those she needed to rescue.