Eva and Otto
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16. Help from Eleanor Roosevelt and Other Americans

On her first trip to Buffalo, Eva was grateful to learn that Anna Stein and Klara Deppe “had become part of the community of liberal Americans there.” They introduced Eva to their American friends, who embraced Eva. “They saw me, a young woman who didn’t know if her fiancé was still alive, who lived through a French internment camp. They wanted to hear. They were very interested in that. And so they organized luncheons and meetings of the League of Women Voters and some church groups.” Eva later reflected: “I had never seen any nationality in my life that was so nice and welcoming to people who had trouble expressing themselves. They were wonderful.”¹

“My English was very poor at that time,” Eva recalled, “just elementary school learning—and I was terribly self-conscious about that fact. But soon I learned how generous my new American friends were about that, and I became more at ease, and gradually more fluent.”² Eva had taken three or four years of English in school in Germany. She had also learned some English from two British students in her group at the Walkemühle who did not know any German and taught her English songs. While on board the Nea Hellas to America, she had also tried to read Dickens’s Christmas Carol. “I had a pocket dictionary and remember how painfully I had to look up every third word.”³

Eva had no illusions about her task: “In this situation, it did not do to be shy and reserved. Since each potential receiver of an emergency visa needed an American sponsor who would vouch for him financially, I had to make it my business to find such people, and then to convince them of the justice of my requests.”⁴
Eva’s first and most important American friend was Dorothy Hill. “Apart from my two teachers [Anna Stein and Klara Deppe], and several organizations in New York, such as the Jewish Labor Committee, the Emergency Rescue Committee, and the President’s Advisory Committee, the one person who helped more than anyone could have expected, and who quickly became my, and later our, best friend, was Dorothy Hill.” Eva later fondly described Hill:

A friend of Anna Stein, a graduate of Wellesley College, the director of the Wellesley Summer Institute of Social Progress, she was a lady—a lady in the true sense of the word—who knew all the right people, who was respected by all and loved by most, and she took us into her heart. Her letters of recommendation carried weight; her phone calls opened doors that otherwise would have remained closed to me... Dorothy, in her warmth and generosity, helped me do things that normally would have been impossible.5

Dorothy Parmelee Hill was born in Buffalo, New York, on July 1, 1893. After graduating from the Buffalo Seminary, she received her degree from Wellesley College in 1915, where she was a “Wellesley scholar.” Hill began her career as cofounder of the Hill Publicity Bureau in Buffalo in 1916, where her first clients included poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and writer Margo Asquith. Hill then worked with the Buffalo branch of the Consumer’s League and was appointed to the New York State Joint Legislative Committee headed by social reformer and feminist Mary Dreier. Through that committee’s efforts, legislation was passed in New York state establishing the minimum wage and the eight-hour workday for women factory workers during the administration of Governor Alfred E. Smith.6

In the 1930s while Hill was the only woman serving on the mayor of Buffalo’s Committee on Unemployment in New York state, she became acquainted with Eleanor Roosevelt. Hill assisted Mrs. Roosevelt with the investigation of cases of needy families in the Buffalo area who had made personal appeals to the White House. In 1933, Hill was appointed by the president of Wellesley College to a committee of eight alumnae to find good use for the campus in summertime. She founded
and was the director of the Summer Institute for Social Progress, an annual two-week conference that continued for twenty-five years. Hill also helped establish the Buffalo Branch of the ERC. She was working with the ERC when she met Eva in the fall of 1940.

Dorothy Hill found something deeply compelling in the story of the young refugee, Eva Lewinski. And Eva was drawn to the values of her new American friend and the loving help she so generously offered.

Because Eva was attesting to the good character of her ISK colleagues in seeking visas for them, including Otto, it was critical to have a respected American vouch for her to the U.S. officials. On October 28, 1940, two weeks after Eva’s arrival in America, Dorothy Hill provided a reference letter for Eva. “I am glad to vouch for the fine character of Eva Lewinski and to declare my belief that the statements she makes about Otto are true,” Hill wrote. “I find her to be a young woman of unusual honesty, courage and spirituality.” Hill further reported that “Ms. Lewinski is engaged to be married to Otto Pfister for whom she writes the biographical sketches attached. She is suffering terrible anxiety for his safety.” This was partially inaccurate. Eva and Otto had not yet decided to marry, but Eva did not correct this—for reasons she would later need to explain to ISK leader Willi Eichler.

Hill also commented that Eva belonged to a group that taught “doctrines contrary to the Hitler regime” and that the group maintained the publishing house Éditions Nouvelles Internationales in Paris. Hill added that this publishing house had “published Irmgard Litten’s recent book so favorably reviewed by Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt which gives further evidences of the sacrifices for democracy made by the whole group of which Otto Pfister is a prominent member.” Hill concluded:

My confidence in Miss Lewinski is strengthened by the fact that she is an intimate friend of Dr. Anna Stein who in turn is a close friend of mine living at 447 Potomac Ave. in Buffalo. Since her arrival in September 1938, Dr. Stein and I have worked
closely together on a local refugee committee and have become strong personal friends. Dr. Stein cannot say enough about the fine personality of Eva Lewinski and of Otto Pfister. I am convinced that they both are people of integrity who have been very active in anti-Hitler work and that Miss Lewinski has given a really restrained picture of Otto Pfister’s fine work and his present danger.9

Dorothy Hill’s comment about Eva’s work with Éditions Nouvelles Internationales and its publication of Irmgard Litten’s book would provide an important connection between Eva, the unknown refugee, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Litten’s book Beyond Tears was about her son Hans, who had been imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis until he committed suicide in the Dachau concentration camp. In her newspaper column “My Day,” published on September 17, 1940, less than a month before Eva arrived in America, Mrs. Roosevelt had reviewed Beyond Tears, noting that the archbishop of New York had written a short foreword to the book in which he stated “I hope this book may be widely read as a moving human record which illustrates the spirit of the Nazi tyranny.”10 Roosevelt concluded her column:

I hope with the Archbishop, that many people who are not yet awake to the menace of power which knows no restraints except the measure of its own physical force, will read this book. But I shall not blame them if they put it down occasionally with a feeling that they cannot bear the human suffering it depicts.11

With a letter dated October 31, 1940, just over two weeks after her arrival in America, Eva submitted reference letters in support of a number of her ISK colleagues to George Warren, the head of the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, along with the reference letter that Dorothy Hill wrote about her. Regarding her own background, Eva also referred Warren to additional reference letters submitted by “Mr. S.L. Levitas” and “Mr. Wilhelm Sollmann.”12

Sol Levitas, who became executive editor of the New Leader, wrote: “Political refugees who are now stranded in France . . . will, no doubt land in concentration camps if not rescued in time.” He advised the committee that he had known Eva personally for many years and praised
her “intellectual and political integrity.” He concluded: “I know that she is very much interested in the fate of her friends whose names she has supplied to your committee, and I can vouch for the facts which she has presented to your committee in connection with these cases.”

F. Wilhelm Sollmann had been a member of the Social Democratic Party in Germany during the Weimar Republic and had served as secretary of the interior in Germany and a member of the Reichstag for eight terms before being driven out of Germany by the Nazis. In 1937 he had immigrated to the United States, where he became a staff member of Pendle Hill, Quaker Graduate Center for Religious and Social Studies, in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. Noting that he had known Eva since 1932, Sollmann wrote: “Although I do not belong to her political group, I am glad to testify that Miss Lewinski has a splendid record in the struggle against Hitlerism and Communism in Germany as well as in France where she has lived as an exile for several years.” He concluded:

The friends of Eva Lewinski were very active in the underground movement inside Germany and in the work of German refugees in Western Europe. Many of them have sacrificed freedom, health and even their lives. There is no doubt that each member of that group would have to risk imprisonment for many years or execution if the present German government would get hold of them.

We have previously referred to portions of the detailed letter written by Eva to ISK leader Willi Eichler on November 2, 1940, less than a month after her arrival in New York. Now we have reached the date on which she wrote that letter and can more fully appreciate the context. Having worked night and day since her arrival in America on October 13 to obtain U.S. visas for her colleagues trapped in southern France, she finally found a moment to report to Eichler about these efforts.

Eva’s November 2 letter provides not only specific information of historical interest but also a glimpse into the complex relationship between her and Eichler. The letter was written in the dry objective style of a dutiful and dedicated business subordinate presenting a factual memorandum to a ranking superior. It presented in chronological order the actions taken by their small Paris ISK group since the German
invasion in 1940. As previously noted, Eva often referred to others by their initials or pseudonyms, and at one point she referred to herself in the third person by a pseudonym, “Helene.”

We know from Eva’s diaries and letters to Otto about the emotional pain she had endured during the period she now reported with such dry objectivity to her ISK leader. In a brief note introducing her translation of this letter, Eva later commented about the nature of her relationship with Eichler:

If my letter sounds like an account of what I had been doing since leaving Europe, and if it is factual rather than personal, that is exactly what our relationship was. We were friends, close friends; but Willi was in charge of the group, and even if it often ran counter to our emotions, we discussed decisions, and abided by them.15

Eva began by apologizing to Eichler for her delay in writing to him. She explained, “I had to run around so unbelievably much in order to make progress in the matter of the visas, I simply did not get around to writing sooner. There was just enough time to do all the necessary typing late in the night which had to be done in connection with the efforts to get visas. Now some of this work is under way, and today is the first day since I came here, where I was able to stay at home from morning to evening, and where I can write with a little more calm.” Eva then addressed another preliminary matter that she did not want to leave to the end of the letter “because the news is so good”:

Last night I got a cable from my brother in Marseille in which he tells me that Otto arrived in Montauban, and that they expect him in Marseille. You can imagine, Willi, how happy I am, although, obviously, he is by no means out of danger. But whatever I have heard about the way he got out of the prison camp (I don’t know any details, just that he was discharged, and that Gaby [Cordier] met up with him in Paris, from where he wrote to our friends in Montauban on September 26, the day I had arrived in Lisbon, and from where he now, apparently with Gaby’s help, has arrived at our friends) gives me confidence that things will continue to go well.
Eva noted that obtaining a visa for Otto “will probably be made easier through the fact that Jef Rens happens to be here [in New York] who has great confidence in Otto and in [René Bertholet] because of the work they did together, and who has important relations here which he is willing to put into action on Otto’s behalf. I assume you agree with me that Otto should try to get away from there as fast as possible?”

Eva provided a brief summary for Eichler of what happened to their colleagues in France since the German offensive in May 1940. She reported about the detention, flight, and entrapment in southern France that she and the others in the Paris ISK group had experienced. Unwilling to focus on the difficulties she endured, Eva wrote only one sentence in this long letter to Eichler about her own escape through the Pyrenees, not even mentioning the trauma of being torn away from Europe and the man she loved: “I will not write any details about the crossing of the border, the trip through Spain and Portugal etc., although some interesting experiences were connected with it. More important now is the situation here.”

Eva then turned to the challenges she now faced in seeking visas. She explained to Eichler how the procedures had changed and how she had to “search for well-known personalities who knew our friends personally, and who could confirm that in all concreteness and why these people were in danger.” As if breathing a sigh of relief, Eva reported that “as of today” the cases for her ISK colleagues had been submitted with all completed documents. In view of the presidential election the following day, she cautioned, “It is possible that all will go well now. But it is also possible that the doors may be closed entirely tomorrow (perhaps after unfavorable election results).”

One of Eva’s tasks in submitting these applications for emergency visas to the President’s Advisory Committee was to prepare biographical sketches of her colleagues stranded in southern France, explaining their work against the Nazis and the danger they faced. In a typed summary, Eva provided brief descriptions of the backgrounds of Otto Pfister, Erich Lewinski (Eva’s brother) and his wife Herta, Hans Kakies, Erna Blencke, Eugen Albrecht, Nora Block and her sister Herta Walter, Gisela Peiper, Frieda Timmermann, Irmgard Amelung, and René Bertholet and his wife Johanna. This summary, set forth in full in Appendix A, includes the following succinct description of Otto’s background:
Pfister, Otto, born on April 8, 1900, at Munich. Cabinet-maker and interior decorator. Has done on close relation with French, Belgium and Luxembourg trade-unionists underground work from different borders into Germany, especially during the war. Has been captured by German military authorities at Luxembourg’s invasion, was prisoner in Germany for several months. Germans did not realize his identity. So he succeeded in coming back to France. He is now in the unoccupied part of France and must soon leave so the Gestapo may not put its hands on him.

Anna Stein submitted a memorandum accompanying these biographical summaries. She explained: “All of the persons named here worked predominantly in the anti-Nazi movement. Some of them managed to work for five years in the underground-movement in Germany, some had to flee from Germany, as soon as the Nazis came into power.” She described the danger they faced: “During the last years they chose to stay in the former democracies around the German border, because they considered it their duty to fight Hitler directly and carry out underground relations with the illegal movement in the Nazi ruled countries as long as possible. Their names are well known to the Gestapo. In case they fall into Nazi hands, they will face death or lifelong imprisonment.”

Stein also provided a brief summary of the background of the ISK, including descriptions of the ISK’s philosophical foundation, its school (the Walkemühle), and its publishing activities. Stein concluded: “Members of the group are therefore in a great danger and in urgent need of obtaining speedy help. Their devotion to the ideals of justice and liberty recommends them as desirable citizens in America.”

Eva’s first contacts with Eleanor Roosevelt seeking support for visa applications

Dorothy Hill arranged a meeting for Eva with Eleanor Roosevelt in late November 1940, less than two months after Eva’s arrival in America. Hill and Malvina Thompson, secretary to Mrs. Roosevelt, also attended. In this meeting, Eva presented the story of her friends trapped in southern
France, and Roosevelt agreed to write a letter to the State Department on their behalf.

Roosevelt was diligent in following up on her commitment to Eva. In a brief letter to Miss Thompson dated December 9, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles wrote: “I refer to your letter of December 2, 1940 enclosing a communication from Dr. Anna Stein . . . regarding the cases of ten refugees which have been presented to the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. I am having these cases looked up and will write to you again shortly regarding their present status.”

It is not surprising that Eleanor Roosevelt directed this matter to Sumner Welles. Welles had a long and close personal relationship with Mrs. Roosevelt; and in the face of bitter resistance from his colleagues, he was one of the few officials in the State Department in Washington with sympathy for the plight of political refugees and Jews threatened by Hitler in Europe. His successes in contributing to the rescue of those trapped in Europe were tragically limited by many factors, including the political infighting at the State Department and a personal scandal that led to his resignation. But there is no question that he helped with the rescue of Eva’s colleagues.

On December 11, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a note to Welles inquiring about the delay in the State Department’s handling of visa cases submitted by the President’s Advisory Committee. Not knowing of Roosevelt’s follow-up communications with Welles, Eva sent a letter dated December 12 to Miss Thompson at the White House. Eva politely reminded Thompson of their visit:

I do not know if you remember my name: Miss Dorothy Hill from Buffalo and I were at your house two weeks ago to see Mrs. Roosevelt. After having listened to the story of our difficulties, Mrs. Roosevelt was kind enough to promise to write the State Department a letter about our friends, several refugees now trapped in France, in order to hasten the issuance of an emergency visa on their behalf. But up to today, Mr. Warren’s office [the President’s Advisory Committee] has not received any answer from Washington concerning these cases. May I therefore ask you if you or Mrs. Roosevelt did get a reply? I am extremely sorry to trouble you again, but I think constantly of our friends
and the lives they are obliged to lead. So I can’t help but to do all I can to get them over more quickly.

I do not need to repeat how deeply thankful I feel for all the help Mrs. Roosevelt has granted us.20

Meanwhile, Welles responded to Mrs. Roosevelt’s December 11 inquiry about the status of these cases by letter dated December 13, 1940. Welles described the further vetting by the State Department of recommendations submitted by the President's Advisory Committee. He assured Mrs. Roosevelt that he had made “carefully inquiry” and that there was “no unnecessary delay.”21

Even with the persistent support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, obtaining these visas on an individual basis was an onerous and time-consuming process. Otto’s visa application would be the most challenging.