Eva and Otto
Pfister, Tom, Pfister, Kathy, Pfister, Peter

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21. Otto’s Wait for a Visa in Southern France

During this time of uncertainty about Otto’s visa application, the correspondence between Eva and Otto provides an intimate and revealing account of events. Their letters reflect their love and hope that Otto still might be granted the precious visa that would allow them finally to reunite. They also shed more light on the delays of the consulate in Marseille in arranging the additional interview of Otto and submitting a report on that interview to the State Department in Washington. During this period, Eva also sent letters to ISK leader Willi Eichler with periodic reports on her efforts to rescue her ISK colleagues.

Waiting for word about his visa in Montauban, Otto wrote to Eva on January 9, 1941:

My dearest, do you know that I feel that you are closer to me now than ever? I cherish your face when I fall asleep, and again, when I wake up. You don’t always have the same expression; at times you look serious, grave. Your deep eyes look at me with infinite goodness, mixed with signs of past sadness, of desperate efforts, of tiredness perhaps, but where hope is not absent. Your mouth is closed, tired to have wanted so much to convince, but without bitterness, ready for a good smile, for tenderness.

And your look, sweet and penetrating, seems to want to commit me, I know to what: to do my best. I feel that I am not going to disappoint your look.

But there are other moments where another face comes to me. Your eyes then are full of joy, your forehead has forgotten your worries. . . .
I would like so much a photo of you, a recent one that shows me that you have not forgotten to smile. Will you send me one, please? Did you get mine?

Turning to his visa case, Otto informed Eva that he had learned in a letter from Johanna Bertholet about a cable Eva had written and what it said about his chances. Based on that information, he said, “I may perhaps hope soon to be called to the Consulate.”

Resuming this letter the following day, Otto explained: “Last night, I could not finish. Yet, it had been one of those rare quiet evenings . . . And this morning, there is a lot of news. Gisa [Gisela Peiper] came back, with an immigration visa. Great, isn’t it? . . . And then, Gisa brought me your cable of December 25 that made me very happy, also to hear that you had gotten mine for Christmas.” And he assured Eva that “Gaby has been traveling for almost two weeks. She seems to be in good shape, and content with her work. . . . All is clear and good now; I am happy.” Otto also shared with Eva some of his recent reading:

Last night I was reading in a little booklet that comes from you: It’s French poems by Rilke. I found it in Mousy’s [Hélène Perret’s] room, and it had been a present from you for her, I believe. I kept it like a little treasure. . . . And now I don’t feel that I want to return it to Mousy. In all the poems in this little book there is one that you will like especially.

Just finished the book about which I already wrote you: The Grapes of Wrath. That is a book that is extraordinary and beautiful from many viewpoints. I would like for you to read it also. What a marvelous figure the mother is! There are so many passages that I would like to read again, with you.

In a letter from Marseille on January 13, Otto reported that shortly after his arrival there, he had a lengthy interview with the U.S. consul in Marseille. “He questioned me for a long time, but I believe that in the end, he had a good impression. He told me that he would still have to cable to Washington, and he gave me an appointment for Jan. 23. So I return to Montauban and come back here on Jan. 22.” Otto was hopeful. “I am glad that I can add this very recent news. I believe, and so does Erich, that we are not too optimistic to think that I will soon
have my visa.” Otto added to this letter a French poem by Rilke (later translated by Eva):

Let’s stay at the lamp, and let’s not talk too much.
Whatever one can say does not equal the vows
Of a lived silence—it’s like the hollow of a divine hand.
It’s true, the hand, this hand is empty.
But a hand does not ever open in vain;
And that is what joins us.
It’s not ours; we precipitate the things that are slow.
It’s already an action when a hand opens.
Let’s look at the life that pulsates in it.
The one who moves is not the strongest.
One has to admire the tacit agreement
Before the strength disappears.

In a letter on January 16, Eva thanked Otto for his recent letters. She told him that she was looking at photos on her table that she had received from him and others. She described them:

On the one, you are playing with a beetle, move it from one hand to the other. On the other one, you are sitting proudly on a wagon, next to an old white-haired Swiss farmer, and look into the world, totally carefree, in this unburdened serenity that I love so. But again and again I look back to one of the three that you sent me. You look so full of love, of deep, consoling tenderness. I wonder if you were thinking of me when that photo was taken. I can’t look at it often enough—it is almost as if you were talking to me, encouraging me.

Eva then confessed, “Sometimes I do need encouragement. I am longing for you deeply, and have no answer to the question what my life would be like if one day there would no longer be any hope to see you again, to live with you. As of now, there is still hope. And believe me, my dearest, I don’t give up the struggle. But it is awfully hard that you are not here yet, that your application is not yet progressing as well as many others.” She added:
How much your letters move me; how they make me richer and better; how I walk with you wherever you go; how happy I am that your eyes (the dear ones—how I would like to touch them gently) are seeing the same streets, corners, old houses, trees, rivers that mine have seen—I will have to tell you much about that. Do you understand that I can’t do it now? Altogether too present are the many concerns and tasks, the big responsibility.

I believe I have never been as alone as I am here. And that has to be learned. It’s true, I have met many good friends—feel close to some of them. But nobody is there for me entirely. . . . When my thoughts are free, they are gravitating around your life, about how I could help more. And when they want to rest, I come “home” to you, to us, to our love, to your letters, to my diary notes, to your photos. That is my real world.

Eva then informed Otto about her recent contacts with other friends. “I had two beautiful, warm letters from Gaby. Be assured, everything is well, can no longer be damaged by either of us. And you: be good to her.” Responding to Otto’s inquiry about Stern, she wrote: “I can’t really say. We don’t hear much of each other. His letter was intended for you. I’ll have to write more about him later—he is very lonely, and very generous, and not at all happy. It’s very hard.”

Eva then asked Otto, “Did I tell you that I also am reading the Grapes of Wrath—my first American book? Such coincidences somehow make me happy. You too?” She ended the letter by telling him, “I would like to write much more; but the Clipper leaves tomorrow morning, and I still have a lot to write tonight. Let me imagine for a moment that you are here, with me—I love you as much as one can love someone.”

In an extensive report to ISK leader Willi Eichler on January 16, Eva first provided an update on the pending “difficult cases” for their ISK colleagues who were still seeking emergency visas, noting the perplexing delays in the processing of Otto’s case. Eva advised Eichler that Otto’s case was still not complete because the State Department found it necessary to have the consul in Marseille make special inquiries before deciding. “I cannot say at all whether a favorable or unfavorable outcome is probable, because to date we have not been able to figure out what...
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exactly is snagging this. But I still have not given up hope that it will work out. It would be too miserable if just this case would not succeed.”

Eva then shared with Eichler the disturbing recent information she had received in letters from colleagues in France about the horrid conditions suffered by thousands still interned in the French camps, including Camp de Gurs, in the cold of winter:

I have received in the last few days a great deal of mail from France of pretty recent dates. The conditions in the camps, apparently especially in Gurs, where we were in the summer, and where since then 8000 Jews from southern Germany and many men from other camps were transported, are so horrible, that it sends chills down the spine. Women, elderly, children, nothing to eat; unheated, leaky barracks; newborn children wrapped in newspapers because there are no rags or cloth; old men fall down, simply broken by cold and hunger; several die daily, human beings who can no longer hold on physically, others who no longer have the courage to wait out the slow dying. It is dreadful; the worst of it is the hopelessness for these many thousands.

Eva ended this letter to Eichler warmly by asking, “Is your new apartment somewhat peaceful? Write, if you can, often and much: human contact and factual information, at least in letters, is the only thing that makes life tolerable in these times, when it comes from real friends.”

On January 18, Eva sent Otto a postcard with a print of *Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan* by Paul Cézanne from the Frick Collection in New York—an image of barren trees in the winter. Otto tucked the postcard in the cover flap of Eva’s “blue book” diary, where it would remain. Eva wrote:

And you, my loving, good man, I take this opportunity to give you an inner greeting and many warm thoughts. Do you like this card? I saw it here in the museum. And despite the unbelievably sad bleakness of the trees, they appear hopeful—in a few months, they will gratefully carry buds, leaves, blossoms and fruit. Perhaps also a symbol for our two lives? Let us believe! I hug you in great, great love!
In his letter of January 24 from Marseille, Otto began by noting, “No word from you since your last letter of December 6. Wonder if something got lost. Sure, we have news through your cable—and what good news it is! But I would like very much to see the long letter which you had promised.” Otto had not yet received Eva’s New Year’s Eve letter that included her assurance that the incident with Gaby had not diminished her love for him. The delivery of mail from Eva to Otto was apparently even slower than from him to her.

Otto then described disturbing delays by the U.S. consul in Marseille in handling his case:

Since yesterday, I am again here with Erich, had a meeting at the Consul’s. When I had been there on the 13th, he told me that he still had to report to Washington before he could issue the visa. Now yesterday, I got the same answer from the second Consul who is now in charge of my case. Apparently, the cable had not been sent. I have to come back within ten days—things don’t seem to go too smoothly. . . . Hope that there are no serious
difficulties. Perhaps you have been successful again—we have such confidence in you, in what you do—you have already obtained so much. I don’t want to be impatient, and am happy that things went well for the other friends. But I am so looking forward to being again with you—why should that not be granted to us after all the hard times?

Why had the report not been cabled to Washington, D.C., in the ten days after Otto’s lengthy interrogation by the Marseille consul on January 13? Why was Otto asked again on January 23 to come back ten days later? Given the extreme danger that Otto faced and the directions sent to the Marseille consul on January 3 to expedite the report and telegraph it to the State Department in Washington, what could have caused these delays? Because individual visa files from this period were apparently destroyed by the State Department and telegrams about Otto’s case between Marseille and Washington were also apparently destroyed, we may never know the answers to these questions.2

In a brief letter to Otto on January 28, 1941, Eva wrote:

Yesterday, they brought me a letter from you; I was so happy that I ran upstairs. And only when I read it, did I realize that it was an old one, of Dec. 7, superseded by the ones of Dec. 30 and Jan. 3 which I got two weeks ago, and already answered. Yet, it was good to read it and to feel that you are with me with your thoughts and your heart.

I am with you also. And that’s why it is so awfully hard that again I can’t tell you that your case has progressed at least as much as that of the others. Even after that, there are still great difficulties to overcome. But if only the first step would finally be taken! No, I don’t want to complain, don’t want to be faint-hearted. But I am so longing for you, and sometimes I am afraid.

Please don’t be sad that this is only a short greeting. . . . On the table is your picture—I look at it, and know that we are as close to one another as one can be.

Eva sent Eichler an updated report on January 28, noting her growing concerns about the delays in Otto’s case: “Otto’s matter is still not
decided. The Consul had the intention to send a favorable report to Washington; however, [he] forgot to do so for more than a week so that again precious time was lost. By now the report should have been sent, and Washington will hopefully soon come to a decision. The whole thing concerns me deeply, as you can imagine.”

She also expressed her disappointment that “Fimmen’s letter does not appear to have arrived. What a shame! It perhaps could have been of use for Otto.” She asked Eichler, “Have you seen Rens yet? If you have not already done so, ask him to send a cable to Mr. Coulter, Acting Chief of the Visa Division, Department of State, Washington D.C., in support of Otto’s case. He would be the right man, emphatic and impressive (if he would also mention his current position) to vouch for Otto’s integrity. Give him my greetings!”

Eva reported on disturbing information she had received about others still suffering in the French internment camps. “Rosa’s [Erna Blencke’s] friend has unfortunately been put again into a camp, and, in fact, in one of the worst camps in Argelès, where about 10,000 people are staying, some on the bare, damp sand without sufficient straw and blankets. They seem to hope to get him out when his visas are complete. It is appalling!”

Eva then told Eichler that she had given “a few talks about the situation facing the political refugees in France, in Buffalo and Cleveland.” She added, “The effect appeared to be very good. Although I gave nothing more than a report of the facts, indeed with a certain point of view that seemed to me important, but without exaggeration, the people were very shaken and stirred up, and probably ready to help more, and with greater understanding, than before.”

Good news about Otto’s visa

In a letter to Eva in French on February 1, Otto exclaimed:

What a great day this is! I have an appointment with the Consul for Febr. 14, and then I’ll get my visa. I wrote you in my previous letter that they had forgotten to cable, and also that I was concerned that something was wrong. Now, this is all of the past, and the rest is not going to be too difficult.
Otto informed Eva that he helped Herta fill a suitcase with Eva’s things that he had recovered from her apartment in Paris, and they would be sent to her via American Express. “It felt good to hold in my hands the clothes that you liked . . . and your mountain boots. What memories, what hope! I can’t help dreaming that we will again be together, even in the mountains, with sun, trees, and strange rocks. . . . I could read happiness on your face.” He added, “I was very glad that Dyno [Lowenstein] brought me from Paris a photo from Port-Giraud. You know, the one from the cistern. How I love that photo, how happy you are in it!”

Otto confessed that he was sad sometimes. “I don’t know how you are living, who is with you, if you can relax from time to time.” He praised Eva’s efforts. “The work that you are doing must demand a lot of strength. But you can really be pleased about all you have accomplished so far.” He assured her that “as far as food goes, things are not too bad. It is a little difficult, but we don’t have to go hungry.” He closed by saying, “I believe these last two weeks will be the hardest to take. How I wait for some word from you!” He added: “P.S. I am enclosing a photo of the chess pieces that I carved while I was in the camp. The photo is not very good, but it might give you some pleasure to have it. P.P.S. What do you think about my bringing my tools with me?”

Eva wrote a letter to Otto in French on February 4 in which she marveled about learning that they were both reading *The Grapes of Wrath*:

> What has been moving me the most for quite a while is the parallelism in your inner life and in mine. You are reading, one of the first books after your return, the *Grapes of Wrath*. The first novel that falls into my hands here is the *Grapes of Wrath*. The
day after having gotten your good letter, I finished this book, and I was overcome by the last scene: the never-stopping rain; the hunger; the man who is going to die because he had wanted to save his child; the girl whose child could not live, and who despite that became a mother, with a heart as great as that of her mother. And that mother—the incarnation of love that never tires—how I would like to become like her!

She asked Otto, “Can you imagine what your letter (of Jan. 9 and 13, with the poem by Rilke) gave me? I cried, and that does not happen to me too often anymore. I would so much want to be with you. And yet, I don’t have the certitude that you will be able to come. Sometimes I feel tired, tired to wait, tired not to be able to do anything. . . . But I know that is not gracious. And I pick up my life again.” She told Otto that when he mentioned his plan to go to Castres to visit a friend, it reminded her of her departure from France:

It brings back to my mind the evening when I took the bus in Toulouse to go to Castres to say goodbye to Yvonne and to Paulette. It was one of those marvelous clear summer evenings. This beautiful country, with its hills and fields, passed by my eyes. I would so much have wanted to stay there, to live with you, to return. But I had to continue on my way, my heart full of anxiety about your fate, and so sad that I might perhaps never see this country again.

Eva assured Otto that she loved the Rilke poem he sent. “I always think of your hand when I read it again, and of the good quiet times we lived with each other. Do you remember our ‘dome’ high in the mountains, in the forest? I love you. I love every bit of memory that ties us, the memory of happy and profound moments, and also those that made us suffer. Thanks also for having sent me Gaby’s letter. Tell her that I think of her with confident friendship, and with love.”

Eva wrote again to Willi Eichler on February 11, 1941. She had not yet received Otto’s letter of February 1 with his news that he would be receiving his visa on February 14. She told Eichler, “For Otto, still no decision,” and she then detailed the status of other pending visa cases. Eva concluded, “You see from this brief exposition how unpredictable the
entire situation is.” Eva advised Eichler that the letter from Edo Fimmen in support of Otto’s case had never arrived. Persisting, she asked, “It would perhaps be appropriate if he sent a new cable, in which he vouches for our friends who until now have received no visas. Do you think he will do that?”

Eva then addressed a disturbing suggestion made by Eichler that Otto should seek a British visa so he could do work with the ISK in England. Eva objected to this and explained her reasons, attempting to separate her personal interest from her rational assessment of the best “fit” for Otto’s abilities in continuing his work with the ISK. Eva explained that the “more serious” option of having Otto remain in France to work in the underground with Bertholet was simply too dangerous: “Due to his work and experiences, he is in disproportionately greater danger in the event of a total occupation of France by the Nazis, than are most of our other friends, particularly our French friends.”

The best option, Eva concluded, was for Otto to work in America, where “he can help with calm, steady work to expand the diverse opportunities offered us here.” She explained: “That a large part of our immediate work here, and probably also our future work, is dependent upon our people being not only trustworthy, but also visibly of a character borne of strong conviction, who reflect the good of our cause by who they are, and who convince strangers to follow, I believe—and you will probably confirm this—that Otto would be very well situated here.” Separate from her personal feelings, Eva shared with Eichler her positive assessment of the development of Otto’s character in his work with the ISK: “its naturalness; calm, independent and focused.” Eva urged,

In a favorable “climate” that he could use so well after this difficult year, I know that he will make the best of it. In the interest of his development, in the interest of the significance of that development for our work, I would very much like that he be given this climate, when other important interests will not be harmed by it.

Eva concluded her plea that it was right for Otto to come to America: “Willi, I hope that you do not misunderstand me? I have the need to tell you where I stand on this matter, and to know whether we’re in agreement and also whether there is a problem.”
Eva ended the letter with a response to Eichler’s concerns about how she was holding up under the pressures of these times:

It is not easy, “not to see these times as too depressing,” as you suggested I try, and I still for the most part have not succeeded. But it does not help anything, and I am doing okay. Last Sunday afternoon I was at the museum and saw a wonderful exhibit of French artists, from David, to the Impressionists, to contemporary artists. Despite the large crowd, it was indescribably beautiful, and my homesickness for France became very, very intense. You also would have loved the exhibit: there are very beautiful Daumiers, previously unknown to me, very warm and socially sensitive; unknown Van Gogh’s, Manets, Corots, very expressive Dégas, Cézannes.

Farewell, dear Willi. I hope good news about you and all friends will soon arrive. Warm, heartfelt greetings!

Otto began a letter to Eva in Marseille on February 11 and continued it on February 12. He first reported that he finally received Eva’s Christmas Eve letter and eagerly awaited his visa:

My dearest, how beautiful, how good is your letter written on Christmas Eve. How you make a gift for me of that evening! And you were successful again—in a few days, on the 14th, I’ll hold this success [the visa] in my hands. Then there will be only a few weeks for the transit visas. Now it is even possible to cable for the Spanish visa as soon as one has the receipt for the Portuguese one. I think that I will be able to apply for the Spanish visa by the middle of next week. And then one only has to have a little more patience, and a little good luck.

Otto also reported that Eva’s brother Erich and his wife Herta expected their Spanish transit visas soon and would perhaps be able to depart within a few days. He added, “I spent many good days with them, and we will miss them. But I am very happy that you will see them again. They’ll bring you part of me, and you won’t be that alone any more; you will have, above all, Herta who is such a great person. And Erich is going to bubble over—he thinks more of you, more than ever.”
Continuing this letter on the following day in a hotel across from the train station in Marseille, Otto expressed his longing to see Eva again:

I am sitting in my hotel room, opposite the station. A nice, clean room, nice people. There are some mimosas on my night table; will put a sprig of them into this letter. The greens from your last letter lie between the pages of your diary which always gives me great pleasure. And then I am thinking of the daisies that we picked high up in the mountains, of the butterfly, of the mushrooms and berries, on our struggling through the rocky mountain, of the Cathedral, of the happiness that shone in your eyes. How I am looking forward to go hiking again side by side with you. And how happy I am at the thought that before long you will again open the door for me. . . . And how I look forward to the day when, near you, I can work again, create something.

Otto ended the letter by quoting another of the rare poems that Rilke wrote in French:

Along the dusty path
The green becomes almost gray.
But this gray, only slightly,
Has in it shades of silver and blue.

Higher up, on the other mountain,
A willow shows the clear
Reverse side of its foliage to the wind
In front of a black that is almost green.

Next to it, a green that is quite abstract
A pale green of vision,
Enfolds with deep abandon
The turn that the century defeats.³

The following day, in a letter dated February 13, 1941, Edo Fimmen informed Eichler that he had just sent a telegram in support of Otto to George Warren, head of the President’s Advisory Committee. Interestingly, Fimmen also advised Eichler that he was unaware that
his previous letter in support of Otto had not reached America. “In any case the telegram has now been sent, and hopefully has its desired success.” Fimmen’s telegram to Warren, dated February 12, 1941, advised: “Further to previous correspondence urge grant of permit to Otto Pfister. Is trustworthy fighter against Nazism and in constant danger in France.”

On February 14, the day Otto went to the U.S. consulate in Marseille to get his visa, he began a letter to Eva with joy and gratitude:

What a rich, happy day this is! Early in the morning came your beautiful, loving letter. I took it along to the Consulate, as a good omen. All went well. I now also have such a thing [the visa] that looks at you with your own eyes, makes another person out of you, perhaps makes you again the person you are. . . . And at noon, Erich arrives, full of joy, with my Portuguese visa! He had handled that very cleverly, was able to cable for it before I had my American visa. You see, sometimes there is good luck. Now I can apply for the Spanish visa right away. I never thought that things would work so smoothly, from this end. What it had cost you to accomplish this success, I can only guess. It really is getting closer now that we’ll see each other again, and yet it is somehow like a beautiful dream.

Otto continued this letter on February 17, telling Eva, “Three days have passed since I interrupted this letter. This morning I got my Portuguese visa, and had Erich’s and Herta’s extended. Tomorrow I can get the Spanish visa, and then all one can do is wait.” Otto then commented on the postcard he received from Eva with the print of Cézanne’s *Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan*: “You are right, dearest, let’s hope that our life also, as those trees, the trees around us, will bear leaves and fruit.” He described a hike he took the day before in Marseille:

Here, we occasionally have beautiful, warm, sunny days. Once in a while, there is a heavy mist, like yesterday when Herta and I with Mrs. Kaegi, who sends warm greetings, climbed up to Notre Dame de la Garde. Did you also see that marvelous view of the city and the ocean? There was wind and sun—white foamy powerful waves were beating high up on the Chateau d’If. We were happy and full of confidence.
In Otto’s continuation of this letter on February 19 and 20, he described the progress of those with U.S. visas in Marseille who were still confronting the additional challenges of escaping to America, including obtaining Spanish and Portuguese transit visas for the trip to Lisbon. After explaining how others were overcoming serious challenges in planning their escapes, he bursts with optimism and confidence: “And now I have here your letter of Jan. 28. This is really a rich week. Am waiting now eagerly for your next one. By then you would have known that my visa had been approved. How I look forward to that letter, to read of your joy.” Otto then reflected on how he would write to Luitpold Stern:
And then, there is Stern’s letter. It is so noble, so full of rare, human dignity that it almost hurts me to read it. What can I tell him? I am almost afraid to write him. How can words, my awkward words, help him in his suffering? How can I console him, I who am holding that trembling happiness in my shy hands that is not granted to him? How should I try to give advice to someone who is as knowing as he is? But I am going to write him, as soon as I have a quiet hour and am relaxed.

Otto ended his letter:

This morning I picked up Frieda [Timmermann] from the station, and now the Spanish visas for Herta, Erich, and Eugen [Albrecht] arrived. This means they will leave within a few days, perhaps even together. Erich would be happy about that. How great that soon you are not going to be alone anymore! There will be so much to talk about. And I, I will remain confident, and they will bring you something of the love I have and hold until we see each other again.

In a letter dated February 17 to Eliot Coulter, acting chief of the State Department’s Visa Division, Eva expressed her gratitude about Otto’s visa. “I wish to inform you that I got a cable from Marseille with the good news that my fiancé, Mr. Otto Pfister, has finally received his visa on February 14th. I am so very glad about this outcome, and I thank you sincerely for the interest you have taken in that case. I am convinced Mr. Pfister will never disappoint the hospitality of this country, nor will I.”

Stern wrote a short note to Eva on February 17 conveying his joy upon receiving her telegram about Otto’s visa:

No one other than you could have worked so diligently and so tenaciously for Otto’s rescue.

Otto has received his American visa on Valentines Day. That is the day here that one celebrates love.

It is again a step taken toward the reunion. Stay completely confident. Your days will become brighter, dear friend.

I stay with my dream: That the two of you will celebrate your birthdays together.