22. Otto’s Escape to America

As with other political refugees in southern France, Otto’s success in obtaining a U.S. visa was the crucial first step in his escape to America. After obtaining the necessary transit visas for Spain and Portugal, he had to escape into Spain by foot over the Pyrenees, as Eva had done. He then had to travel through Spain to Portugal and wait in Lisbon for a spot on a ship to America. In the two months between his receipt of his visa on February 14, 1941, and his departure from Lisbon to New York on April 15, 1941, Otto and Eva continued their correspondence. Eva also continued to report to ISK leader Willi Eichler on the status of her rescue efforts.

In a letter to Otto on February 18, Eva wrote, “Can you imagine how happy I am since Saturday when I got your cable telling me that you finally got your visa? Now, without being too optimistic, there is hope that we will see each other again. And then—I don’t want to think any further, but you are always with me. I almost hope that this letter may not reach you any more, that you are already on your way.” She added: “Saturday night, your cable came. Then there was Sunday, as calm and fulfilled as none had been for a long time. The whole afternoon felt like a holiday; I listened to music, and thought of you.” Eva reflected on her happiness with a twinge of guilt:

Is it bad that I am so happy about the news of your visa, happy despite all the other concerns and sad news? I don’t believe that I am selfish; but the burden of these times worrying that your application would not work out right, has been so great that now, quite naturally, I feel relaxed. Had I a little more money,
I would have bought some flowers for you and me. That could not be. But in the Sunday paper, I found a beautiful photo that I am enclosing, and that should replace the flowers. By the way, I am not the only one who is happy about your news. You have many good friends here—however, some of them know you only through me.

In a brief letter to Eva on February 21, Otto reported that “tonight, there is a great farewell. Herta, Erich, and Frieda [Timmermann] are leaving. It’s going to be empty here without them—we will realize that fully only later. Erich really did a great job here.” He added: “How happy I am that you now will have Herta with you, that Erich can help you. I would very much have liked to send you something with them, but time went by so fast, I could not get anything for you.” Otto noted, “Gaby asked me to tell you that she thinks of you lovingly” and concluded, “Let me be with you, my dearest, now in this rare moment of happiness.”

In a letter to Otto on February 25, Eva lamented that the last weeks were “sad and empty” because no letter had come from him, and she hoped that he had at least received some mail from her. She hastened to add:

Let me not be unfair: the beautiful telegram with the news of your visa shined brightly in the still of these weeks. But human nature, mine at least, is complicated: before you had your visa, I had the feeling that everything depended upon on your receipt of it, and my happiness with the news matched that feeling. But that happiness did not last. Now I see so clearly all the other difficulties facing you that the fact you have your visa appears meaningless compared to them.

In a letter to Eichler on the same day, Eva reported the news that Otto had finally received his U.S. visa and his Portuguese transit visa. She also reported on the progress of other ISK colleagues who had their visas but were working to overcome other difficult barriers to their escape from southern France. She added, “I nevertheless still hope one day to see them arrive here, although the situation naturally worsens day by day. In any case, the tickets have been paid for all those who thus far have visas.”
In a letter from Marseille on March 3, Otto told Eva that things were progressing well for his escape to Lisbon: “I already have my Spanish visa, and now it’s just a question of days. Yesterday we cabled to you and to Erich who is already in Lisbon. If all goes well and quickly for me, it’s not impossible that I will still see all the friends in Lisbon. . . . What a success! You can be proud and pleased my dearest.” Otto explained, “In half an hour, I have to go to the Committee in order to find out details about the trip. If nothing unforeseen happens, it’s possible that I can leave within two or three days.” He added, “Every day I look in the mail for a letter from you that tells me that you know about my visa.” And he reported on his decision to ship his luggage and his toolbox the next day via American Express: “I had wanted to hear what you thought about it, but now I thought I’d better send it anyway. I am not sure if it makes sense as far as the tools are concerned; but if worse comes to worse, it’s a loss of 500 [francs].” In closing, Otto wrote:

It’s going to be true that we will soon be able to live together again. I can hardly believe it. It’s hard for me now not to be impatient, and yet, there is no reason for it, because everything went so much faster than I had a right to expect. Now these last few weeks will go by quickly, and when I’ll see you again, it will seem to me that fate has given me such an extraordinary happiness that it will be hard for me to merit it.

Now it will be true that I am coming home to you.

In a hasty letter to Otto on March 11 Eva wrote, “I now dare to challenge fate and write this to you in Lisbon, though I still have great concerns about whether you have arrived there safely.” Eva told Otto that she had received a cable the day before from Gaby that Otto “had left France for Spain on March 5.” Eva noted, “Today is the 11th but still no news that you arrived. . . . Oh dearest, how very hard it is to learn patience! . . . How good it would be if it were true that this letter will actually reach you in Lisbon!”

Writing to Eva for the first time from Lisbon on March 12, Otto described his departure from Marseille, including Gaby’s reaction to their parting:

My dearest, I cannot yet quite realize that I am here now, already so close to you. And that I still found our friends, and especially
Erich and Herta here! And then—you can certainly feel with me what that means: I can again be myself. How that lets one breathe more deeply!

It's true, I'll have to wait again, one more time. But I, we, must not be impatient now, after this long wait, and after these months of unbelievable pressures. And that waiting is taking place in this friendly city, among these good people, under this bright sky! No, we don't want to be tense now, want to use these days well to prepare for the hours when we'll see each other again. Now I can have your letters with me, and the little blue book, can put it on my night table, can read in it when and where I want.

There is much to tell you. These last days were so full of varying events that I don't know where to begin.

Sooner than we had hoped, the Spanish visa arrived, and the next morning, I left. Gaby came along until Narbonne [city between Marseille and Banyuls sur Mer]. It was not easy for her when we had to part; but she was courageous, and I was grateful for that. What she is writing to you in the enclosed letter, is really in her. What she says of me almost makes me feel ashamed—am afraid she sees me in too generous a light. Do write to her; she feels close to you and is happy to hear from you.

Otto then described his brief stay in Banyuls sur Mer and his hike over the Pyrenees:

Then, for a few days, I had to wait in the little French border town [Banyuls sur Mer]. Beautiful country; peaceful people, vineyards and mounts of olive trees without end, an unbelievably beautiful blue ocean. I wanted to enjoy all this, but could do it only partially. What was ahead of me had me spellbound.

Saturday morning, at dawn, I set out. Was very hopeful, almost surprised that there was no fear in me. Briskly, I climbed on, in the brilliant early morning. Soon, there was the top of the mountain. A quick, strong handshake with my guides, a straight look into their eyes, then on I went downhill. Lost the trail, but should I worry about that? Did not care about the thorny bushes, the rocks—every so often I had to tell myself not to walk too fast, had to remember how you had warned
me when I wanted to take off alone in the mountains. There, a dry creek that leads me back to the trail. After a five-hour hike I arrive at the border, get the stamp of entry, and off to the station. New problem: Spain no longer accepts French currency—what to do? Somehow I manage. A beautiful train ride through Catalogne, greetings on the right side of the snow-covered Pyrenees, to my left the ocean. It is singing in me. A new life begins. And my thoughts go forward, but also back, to those who are waiting.

He concluded with a brief description of his passage through Spain and the joy of seeing Eva's brother Erich and his wife Herta at the station in Lisbon:

Good luck in Barcelona—a seat for the following evening. Third-class carriage, is supposed to be strenuous, but what do I care about that! It's Sunday. I walk through the city, am amazed at the richness in the store displays, also sad about the evident naked misery right next to it.

Madrid the next morning. Had ordered a ticket at Cook's and was lucky again: a seat for the following evening, second class this time. That trip was a pleasure; I could even sleep. Now only one more concern: What would happen at the frontier? I no longer had the same amount of francs, had used some for traveling and living. The officer at the border was pleasant, and let me go. Only now I could really be happy—hardly noticed the ten hours until Lisbon. At the station, a radiant face, open arms: Erich. I could hardly believe it. Then I saw Herta and the others—they all looked happy.

Soon we sat down to eat—you were with us. Have to end now, the letter has to be mailed. How happy I am that now I am so close to you!

In a note to Eva from Lisbon on March 14, Otto made an urgent appeal for Eva's help in getting visas for Johannes Fittko and his wife Lisa who had assisted him and other refugees with their escapes from France:

Something quick and short that is very close to my heart. Something must be done to get a visa for Johannes Fittko and
his wife. . . . I don't know how far you can take this, or whether you're in a position to do anything, but I have promised him, as he essentially helped me to get here (I think you know how), that I would make every effort to assure that he is not forgotten over there. This man has already helped, in numerous cases, many people who were in my situation, and thereby continually risked that his own departure would be put in question.

Otto added the following note along the left margin of his letter: “45 people are over there already with the help of Fittko and the other friends in overcoming the same difficulties I just faced.”

After finally receiving confirmation that Otto was in Lisbon, Eva wrote to him on March 14:

For the first time since the 9th of May, the burden on my heart dissolved, and I saw the world again with eyes that could see joy. It was such a beautiful, clear, sunny day. Many people saw me on my way to work—perhaps I appeared changed somehow. . . . How longingly, how full of love, I wait for the day when I will have you.

On that same day, Stern sent a note to Eva from Haverford, Pennsylvania:

I am very happy: That you have worked so nobly and successfully; that we know Otto is in Lisbon; that your reunion pushes so close; that for once justice and love triumph.

This gives your life a new extraordinary and undying strength. You will know how to put it to use. Your gratitude will become work for the earth.

I have written a few lines this morning:

I lift my head, awakened
By a trilling from a bird never heard before.
There lay the land in snow.
And the morning sun rose.

Also on March 14, Eva reported to Eichler the positive results of her efforts to rescue their ISK colleagues. This good news was tempered by Eva's report that the visa applications of their colleagues Nora Block...
Platiel, her husband Hermann, and Nora’s sister Herta Walter were being held up. The problem stemmed from the views about communism held by the husband of Nora’s and Herta’s sister who was already in America. Eva had enlisted the help of Paul Benjamin on these cases. In a letter dated March 12, 1941, Benjamin wrote to George Warren, head of the President’s Advisory Committee: “I believe Miss Lewinski implicitly when she declares that these women have nothing in common politically with their sister’s husband. . . . I am convinced that they, like Miss Lewinski, are high-minded, industrious people who are devoted to democratic principles and are worthy to be admitted to the United States.”

But even with Paul Benjamin’s strong support, Eva’s efforts to obtain emergency visas in these cases would not succeed. The fact that the husband of Nora’s and Herta’s sister was known as a friend and defender of communists was enough to deny their applications. They would later escape from France to Switzerland with the help of René Bertholet.

Final days of waiting and Otto’s grateful arrival

In her March 14 letter to Eichler, Eva expressed her happiness that it now appeared reasonable to hope that all, including Otto, would arrive. Eva urged Eichler not to give her too much credit for her work in seeking visas for their ISK colleagues:

Willi: Please don’t you, and don’t the others, paint a false picture of what I have done here. Without Anna’s and Klara’s help and their old and stable relationships with exceptionally good and valuable people, I would have been able to do only a small fraction of what I did.

So please: In case my impression is correct that you overestimate my work: Please adjust your judgment as follows, that all of us here, each in his position, have tried with all our strength to do all that was humanly possible to help our friends and our cause. Perhaps you might write to Anna? She is a really great person. And if she had not come up with this magnificent woman in Buffalo, Dorothy Hill, who more and more becomes our best friend, then many important connections would never have
come about. Through Dorothy came also the connection with Mrs. Roosevelt, and many others. You understand, Willi, why it is so important to me to write this to you. I would not want to be unfair to these three able and helpful people for anything.

Eva ended this letter to Eichler by expressing her feelings about Otto’s arrival in Lisbon: “I am so happy to know he is out of the cauldron that really could have brought something awful. I look very much forward to living and working with him. By the way, he sends you his regards. He was particularly pleased that you sent me the photos of him. All, all the best, dear Willi, and the most heartfelt greetings!”

In a letter to Eva from Lisbon on March 21, Otto wrote that he still had not received word that Eva knew he was in Lisbon. “I wait and wait with impatience for a letter from you, for the first sign of life since weeks ago. . . . I would so much like to read of your joy, feel your great joy, after you know that I am here.” He explained that he would likely have to wait three more weeks before departing from Lisbon but observed:

What is that compared to the many months that lie behind us? Now it is actually true. We will see each other, have each other. How indescribably wonderful that will be! Oh Eva, what a great, deep happiness it will be when you stand before me. I ask myself again and again: have I deserved that?

In Eva’s letter to Otto written on the same day, she referred to Otto’s birthday on April 8 and asked him:

What do I wish for you? Nothing that I do not wish for us. And that I can write that down after this hard year with a deep belief that it can become true—that is the most beautiful gift that could be given to us, to you and me.

Eva wrote a letter to Otto on March 24, hoping that it would arrive in time for his birthday:

I have a free hour, and tomorrow morning a Clipper will leave, and today I got your two good letters, the last from France, the first from Lisbon—and perhaps my letter will get there in time
for April 8—so I have to quickly tell you that I love you and how happy I am when I think of you.

It is so unreal that I can write to you directly, that I can write your name, the good whole name on the envelope. I would like so much to do something nice for you, but I have been awfully busy the last few weeks, fortunately lately also with earning some money.

My dearest, now I almost feel as though we took the way over the mountains, through Spain, together. So clearly I see
you stride out, hear you sing, see your eyes radiant—and at the same time I suffer because of all the misery.

She recalled her own feelings when she had to leave France and cross the Pyrenees and the ocean, leaving Otto behind:

And then the climb over the mountains, without you, and the crossing of the ocean, without you—and I did not know where to send my thoughts to find you, I only felt: for me there is only to think of the past, not of a future.

Oh my dear, and yet it was all right and necessary, and neither you nor I suffered in our inner life from it—sometimes I could cry with gratitude.

I’ll write to Gaby often. I love her, and know how hard her life is, and with what courage she masters it.

And she noted at the end of the letter, “How pleased I am that the blue book will come with you, and how I look forward to you!!”

On Eva’s birthday, April 2, she wrote to Otto confirming her receipt of news that he would be departing from Lisbon on April 15. She asked, “Dearest, can that really be true?” She cautiously allowed herself to believe it. “I cannot yet completely grasp it, and yet there is something in me that gently allows me more trust that this year is really coming to an end.” She told Otto that before going to work that morning, she bought flowers as his gift to her, “beautiful red roses.” She then gave Otto updates about the current status of their other colleagues seeking to escape to America, noting that unresolved difficulties had still precluded the granting of visas to René Bertholet and his wife Hanna.

During this time, Eleanor Roosevelt was also being informed about the progress in Eva’s visa cases behind the scenes. In a brief letter to Mrs. Roosevelt dated April 7, 1941, Sumner Welles reported, “I now take pleasure in enclosing a memorandum from the Visa Division indicating the action taken up to date” in Eva’s pending visa cases. The enclosed memorandum, dated April 3, 1941, was addressed to Welles from George Warren of the President’s Advisory Committee. It listed the names of all of those to whom visas had been issued, including Otto; those whose cases had been approved by the Interdepartmental Committee on Political Refugees but were still “pending final action at the appropriate consular offices,” including Hans Kakies; those whose cases were still
“under consideration by the Interdepartmental Committee,” including René and Johanna Bertholet; and those whose cases had been “disapproved after careful consideration” by the Interdepartmental Committee, including Nora Block and Herta Walter.5

With the help of U.S. officials such as Sumner Welles, Eliot Coulter, George Warren, and Hiram Bingham, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had fulfilled the commitment she had made months earlier to Eva, an unknown refugee, to try to help rescue Eva’s endangered colleagues.

On his 41st birthday, April 8, 1941, Otto wrote Eva a short letter from Lisbon that was filled with anticipation of his departure. He spoke of two photos he had of Eva: the one she left for him with the note “pour toi” and another of her in the French countryside:

Only eight more days, and I’ll be on my way. The day is coming so close that we will be together again. I can hardly quite believe in it, and even over there, it will take some time to “realize” it, same as when I entered Paris, walked freely through the streets.

Erich and Herta will be with you within a few days. It makes me very happy that it had been possible at the last minute still to get a place on the boat for Herta. But of course, you know all that now, and you’ll know thousands of other things that they will have told you... 

Many thanks for the flowers, my dearest, the real ones and the ones on the picture. They are the only decoration in my little room. Also your photo, the serious one. Heavy, almost sad do you look, and like a big question. But I still have another photo of you with me, the one at the cistern. I look at that when I want to see you cheerful, happy.

In a letter to Eva from Lisbon on April 14, Otto provided news of the sailing dates of other friends and told Eva: “Now this is probably the last letter I’ll write you before we see each other again. Tomorrow evening, we take off.” Otto departed from Lisbon the following day, April 15, 1941, on the Portuguese ship SS Nyassa.6

On April 30, 1941, shortly after his arrival in New York, Otto wrote a letter in French to Eliot Coulter, acting chief of the State Department’s Visa Division, expressing his gratitude for Mr. Coulter’s help in allowing him to enter the United States:
It is with true pleasure, after my arrival to the United States, that I express to you my great and sincere gratitude for the effective assistance you have given me. I know from Miss Eva Lewinski (and from Miss Dorothy Hill of Buffalo, whom I had the great pleasure of meeting here) all of the interest that you have shown me, and I appreciate it all the more because I recognize how the circumstances of my case could carry divergent interpretations at first glance.

I am very happy to have found myself here among close friends, finally again under a sun where one can breathe freely. And I can assure you that this country will never regret the generous attitude that it has taken toward me and my friends. In the hope of having the chance sooner or later to express all my gratitude to you in person.

Eva was also deeply grateful for the opportunity provided by those in this country who were willing to provide asylum for her and her colleagues. Sometime after her December 27, 1940, meeting with Eleanor Roosevelt in the White House and prior to Otto’s arrival in New York in April 1941, Eva had a third brief meeting with the first lady. Eva described the impact of this meeting in her 1979 memoir “To Our Children”:

Later on, I was able to see Mrs. Roosevelt again, this time in New York at the apartment of Miss Malvina Thompson, her secretary and friend, and she wanted more information in order to help a young writer, Hans Litten, prisoner of the Nazis, whose mother I knew, and who waged a desperate fight to save him. Again, Mrs. R’s warm openness was extraordinary. She was concerned as a mother would be who wants to assist another mother to save her son. Our visit was short; she had to attend a meeting of the Save the Children Foundation, and she asked me if I wanted to come along to the place so we could talk some more in the taxi. In front of the house, a cruising cab stopped; she got in, and so did I, and driver said: “Hello Eleanor, how are you?” She smiled when she answered.

Perhaps by the time you’ll read this, this episode might not seem in any way special to you. To me, the young refugee from oppression in Germany where fear of and submission to
authority was a national characteristic, this was overwhelming. And this encounter did perhaps more than many another later experience to convince me that the United States was a country that I would come to love.7

Eva also noted that “none of the people who had issued financial affidavits of support [for the refugees Eva helped with visas] were ever called upon for financial help. All our friends, often through very hard work, were immediately self-supporting; some finished their often interrupted education and were able to do important work in their respective fields.”8

On May 5, 1941, shortly after Otto’s arrival in New York, Eva was given a half day off work to go to City Hall to marry Otto in a brief civil proceeding. Her brother Erich was the required witness. Eva recalled, “Then at the automat, we had lunch, and then I went back to work.”9

It is not clear what work she returned to on that day. While Eva worked to rescue her ISK colleagues, she needed money to help pay her rent. She initially took a job painting flowers on China plates for $12 a week. She was then hired to do clerical work “for an old Russian man” at a Jewish rehabilitation organization that provided vocational training to help impoverished Russian Jews.10 She also worked extensively for the Emergency Rescue Committee.

Otto’s arrival in New York and their marriage appeared to mark a happy ending to the challenging personal ordeals that Eva and Otto had each survived since their separation a year earlier on May 9, 1940. Unfortunately, Eva immediately faced another challenge: Willi Eichler would sharply criticize her decision to marry Otto.

As leader of the ISK, the group to which Eva had devoted nearly two decades of her young life at profound personal sacrifice, Eichler would take the position that Eva’s decision to marry Otto was an unwarranted breach of the ISK’s rules and of his trust in her. Under the circumstances, these charges could not have been more painful for Eva. She would explain and vigorously defend her decision to Eichler.