Eva and Otto

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23. Eva’s Defense of Her Decision to Marry Otto

Willi Eichler learned that Eva and Otto had married from other ISK members then in America including Erna Blencke, who was among the ISK’s leaders. In a letter to Blencke dated June 6, 1941, Eichler wrote, “Now a word about Eva’s wedding, which I heard about through your letter, although I don’t know whether it even really happened. It is correct that, based on the reasons that were so far presented to me, I think it was the wrong decision.” He added, “I have no idea why Eva did not at least tell me about the fact that she got married, although I guess that she thought this to be superfluous after she had also not shared the considerations that led to the decision.” Eichler recognized that it may have been difficult for Eva “to articulate such considerations in a written letter,” but he noted that “it appears as if you also had no chance to discuss the issue with her, although, judging from your letter, it was generally agreed that all of you [Blencke and other ISK members in America] wished to discuss the decision with her.”

Blencke had stated in her letter that she was “convinced that [Eva] had serious reasons for taking this step.” But Eichler countered, “I cannot imagine them at the moment, at least not insofar as there is certainly no serious reason for not discussing matters of this sort with your closest friends.” He added, “The fact that these steps were not discussed appears to confirm the unfortunate fact that our relationships are defined by a lack of openness and understanding. A confrontation is avoided by presenting the others with a fait accompli because it can be assumed that no one will be inclined to discuss things that have already been decided and can no longer be changed.”
In a letter to Eichler dated August 13, 1941, Eva answered his criticism. She began by conceding that her delay in writing and addressing “the conflict that has emerged between us” could only partly be attributed to the work that was keeping her busy. Eva noted that Eichler had recently received “detailed letters” about this from Blencke and other ISK members, some of which were known to her, and described her initial reaction to these letters:

I immediately wanted to sit down and address the individual statements made in them, correct and reject them because I am convinced that they create a wrong image of the things they describe, partly because, by stressing certain less important things and leaving more important ones out, they must create an impression that was not intended by the author. At the same time, I am convinced that these letters, meant as contributions to aid our common understanding, were written with only the best intentions in mind. Because I cannot assume that my letters will not contain similar mistakes, I have lately not felt the courage to write at all.

Eva conceded that her delay in addressing this issue with Eichler was not justifiable. She then explained, in careful detail, why she made the decision to marry Otto and why she believed that the decision was consistent with ISK principles. Because of confidentiality concerns, she referred to herself in the third person, using one of her ISK pseudonyms, “Helene.” She referred to Otto by his pseudonym “Tom,” and she referred to Eichler in the third person by one of his ISK pseudonyms, “Bill.”

Eva first addressed what she considered the “most important point” about the ISK commitment regarding marriage: “I have never been
aware of the fact that any of us promised not to take a step such as the one Helene has taken [marriage]. The only—and important—thing that we agreed upon was that we would not do it for personal reasons, but only if more general interests made it necessary.” She provided examples of such decisions that had previously been made for “general reasons,” including the difficult decision that she should marry Stern if necessary to obtain a U.S. visa: “It was for such general reasons that Helene, as I wrote in my letter to you at that time, decided to form this bond with Luitpold [Stern].”

Eva explained: “It was only because of these general reasons that, in the case at hand, the step was taken so soon after Tom’s [Otto’s] arrival. The fact that taking such a step was in this case consistent with the wishes of the involved parties played only a subordinate role when the decision was made.” She concluded: “I therefore regard the accusation against Helene, the charge that she coolly disregarded promises and resolutions, as not justified.”

Eva then described in careful detail the process of her efforts to obtain visas for her ISK colleagues, including her contacts with Eleanor Roosevelt, and why it was necessary to disclose her personal relationship with Otto to American officials and to marry Otto immediately upon his arrival. Eva noted that Eichler had argued in one of his letters to Erna Blencke that Eva’s mistake was that she had taken the first step of disclosing her special relationship with Otto to American officials. Eva responded to this contention—again referring to herself as “Helene” and to Otto as “Tom”:

The specifics of Helene’s case were as follows: when she came here, she had to work on behalf of all friends, in the order of the cases’ respective urgency. Because she did not know at the time whether Tom was still alive, no plans to work on his case were made at first; after all, one did not want to risk wasting the limited resources that were at hand. Shortly after her arrival here she learned through a telegram . . . that efforts to help Tom were now very urgently needed; and a few weeks later she heard that, how exactly remained unknown to her, he had escaped from the Nazis. . . . It was at this point that urgent measures were taken to obtain an affidavit, etc., all of it still without highlighting his personal relationship to Helene.
Eva explained that Anna Stein had introduced her to Dorothy Hill, who was “tremendously helpful” and had introduced Eva to Eleanor Roosevelt. Eva added that Hill had also obtained and at times even drafted the necessary documents for a number of their colleagues, including Otto. Hill had learned from Anna Stein about the “special relationship between Helene and Tom” and was adamant that Eva should disclose the relationship: “She thought it was completely wrong not to mention the nature of their relationship to the authorities, because in this particularly difficult case, naming familial reasons could be extremely helpful. At the same time, she [Hill] sent a letter of recommendation to the administrative authorities, in which she recommended Helene and also referred to her as Tom’s fiancée.”

Eva then explained the importance of the decision to disclose her relationship with Otto. She reminded Eichler of her earlier letter in which she had advised him that all submitted cases except Otto’s had been approved:

In Tom’s [Otto’s] case, however, great difficulties emerged, which were caused and explained by the specifics of his case, and they began to take on such large political proportions, that the success of the whole endeavor hung by a thread. At this point, Helene decided to make use of both the good reputation, which she had by then earned, and her personal relationship with Tom, and to go directly to the officials in the State Department who were the source of the difficulties.

Thanks to the 30-minute conversation, or rather hearing, that she had to sit through [with Eliot Coulter, acting chief of the Visa Division of the State Department], accompanied by a good American friend [Paul Benjamin], as well as the belated good and open-minded impression Tom made at the consulate [in Marseille], he was not only granted a visa, but Helene’s and her friends’ esteem also grew.

Being familiar with the social customs here, Helene knew that her decision to have used her relationship to Tom when speaking to the authorities would have the practical consequences [marriage] that later indeed followed. However, she was convinced that she could take this responsibility, that it was indeed her duty, because this really was the only chance to have
his case approved. She also believed him to be in danger, despite his good language skills, especially since his experiences with the Nazis, about which she had by then heard a few more details. Everyone who knew the situation here not only agreed that it was right to act this way, but encouraged us to do so whenever Helene or I hesitated.

Eva told Eichler that she was explaining this in such detail because it showed that it was “especially necessary in this case” to disclose her personal relationship with Otto, “which then, along with many other factors . . . made the following steps inevitable.” She added:

Just one more word on the reasons why all of those familiar with the situation deemed it necessary to accept these consequences shortly after Tom’s [Otto’s] arrival: around that time, a good dozen of our cases were under consideration at the administrative authorities, among them some very important ones such as the extension of Tegel’s [Kakies] visa, and things were not moving forward. It appeared to be an excellent idea to combine Tom’s arrival with a thank-you visit to the official [Eliot Coulter] in Washington, whom Helene had previously met to plead Tom’s case. Such a visit would give Tom the chance to at once make a good impression and resolve any existing doubts regarding his integrity while also using the opportunity to try to plead for the still pending cases. Given the situation here, this was, however, only possible after having gotten married. And the intervention was of such urgency that no one wanted to be responsible for postponing it until after Helene and Bill [Eichler] had the chance to exchange letters.

Eva then tackled the tough question of why she had not notified Eichler in advance. Her answer was complex and revealing:

What remains is the question why Helene, who had foreseen the necessity of all these steps, did not notify Bill in advance. And this in fact presents a point at which Helene cannot be spared earnest criticism. She was convinced, and rightly so, that she would not be able to discuss the content of this issue . . . and
that she would therefore here—as in many other cases—have to make a decision to the best of her knowledge and on her own. This fact, however, she should have of course disclosed.

At a point in time, however, when Tom’s release still seemed like a miracle to her, she did not really dare to believe in his arrival before she actually saw him face to face. I don’t know whether you know her personality as well as I. In a certain sense she is—you could say—superstitious or, to be more precise: she is a great pessimist, in the sense that she can only live and work if she is very well prepared that a project, in which she is objectively or personally involved, could have a bad outcome. If she has envisioned the possibility of such a failure in concrete detail and has consequently braced herself for it, she somehow feels better prepared and can therefore do whatever it takes to work towards a successful solution. And yet she does not, in earnest, believe in it.

I think this attitude can be seen as a method of self-protection: she is not sure how she could endure the severity of a bad outcome had she previously allowed herself to live in the hope of a good outcome. It was for this reason that it was obviously impossible for her in this case to overcome her own constraints and discuss the steps that would necessarily follow a positive outcome. She regrets this, blames herself and is aware of the fact that she should very much work on her—at least partly unreasonable—inner attitude.

Eva urged Eichler not to judge her shortfall too harshly. In this intensely personal explanation, Eva continued to refer to herself as Helene. She also questioned whether Eichler was really in a position to judge her:

Without wanting to excuse her [Helene/Eva] regarding this issue, I would like to say that I may be in the position to better understand her inner situation at the time and therefore do not judge her shortfall as harshly. As many others, whose exhaustion found a different outlet, she had a very rough year, and although she never complained, it nevertheless was very hard for her. I don’t know, for example, whether anyone who did not witness the situation can imagine how much energy it cost her to leave Europe, at a point when she had to seriously reckon with the
fact that Tom [Otto] may be awaiting a horrible fate, when she had to leave behind everything that she was attached to, people and work, and was faced with a task that, when she imagined what lay before her, went far beyond her own strength—a premonition that was indeed often later confirmed. From this point of view on the situation, which I very unwillingly address and which I only mention in order to try to shed light on the whole issue, I understand her behavior, although I admit, in just the same way that she does, that it was neither correct nor reasonable.

In light of everything Eva had experienced since May 1940, her understatement of her personal sacrifices for her colleagues is extraordinary—particularly knowing that it was written reluctantly in response to an accusation by her ISK leader that she had acted improperly and in her own personal interest by marrying Otto.¹

Eva concluded with an apology to Eichler for playing a part in causing him to worry, but she repeated her conviction that his concerns were unfounded. Reflecting her ISK-taught belief that reason and Socratic dialogue could bring clarity to ethical disagreements, Eva concluded:

I think that this is all I should say about the matter at this moment. That I very much understand your concern, and that I am distressed by the fact that I have played a part in causing you to worry, you will have to believe, Willi. And yet I am convinced that your concerns regarding some of the most important factors are misconceived. I very much hope that we will at some later point have the chance to shed absolute clarity on our respective opinions, and maybe revise some of them.

The subject of Eva’s marriage to Otto was but one part of a long letter that covered a host of other subjects relating to the ISK’s current work. It was apparent that Eva in no way expected this issue to interfere with her commitment to the ISK and its political objectives. Eva did not retain this letter to Eichler, and she never spoke about this issue to her children, the authors of this book. It must have been painful for her. And it likely influenced Eva’s later decisions about the degree to which the ISK should control her personal life.