27. A Devastating Loss

In her 1979 memoir, Eva stated simply,

Our baby lived only for a few hours: an accident at birth—and we had wanted her so much! Otto’s sailing orders were delayed for a week. Then he had to go.

Anticipating that Otto would be leaving for Europe, Eva bought a diary so she could write to him about the baby in his absence. The first entry in this diary was written on May 11, 1944, while Otto was away in OSS training in Virginia—a month after the death of their child and about a month before he would leave for Europe:

Into this book I had wanted to write for you, Otto, for you to read later, the small and big events out of the life of our child. Now life has rejected our child, and only very slowly I find my way back. You will have to leave nevertheless. And although I fight against it, revolt, argue with fate, and make it hard for you, you are right that in reality I agree with your decision, respect you all the more because of it, and would not have it any other way under the circumstances.

Something so awfully hard has intervened in our life, so unspeakably hard. Yet, when I ask myself, seriously and honestly, if I would not have wanted to start on this path, had I known how it would turn out, I can say without hesitation that I would not have wanted to have missed the experience of
these last ten months for anything in the world. This experience with its sweetness and hardness has made another person out of me, makes me understand life and people differently, more fully. How my, our, life is going to continue; how I am going to be strong enough to be the friend and companion you need in the coming times? If and when am I going to have you again? So many big, heavy questions for which there are no answers.

A few weeks later, on May 25, Eva wrote another diary entry directed to Otto after receiving a letter from him. She assured him that “the hard events of the last weeks brought us, if that is possible, even more closely together.” She reflected on their decision to have a child. “Now it’s been almost a year since, after many thoughts back and forth, we took the decision and the courage to have a child.” She acknowledged that all the reasons that had kept them from having a child were still valid: “these times that require one’s total strength to cope with; the responsibility towards the child whose justified demands for attention and care might partially be neglected if, as we are determined, we will continue to be available for our work.” And she recognized that some of their ISK colleagues who “have chosen such a hard life . . . will not understand how we can think of ourselves.” Eva then listed the countervailing forces that had resulted in their decision. “But on the other hand: the longing that is becoming more and more burning for the child that will result from a union of you and me. The certainty that we cannot wait much longer. And the growing confidence that we will be able to give our child enough good things, that in spite of all difficult external circumstances, it will grow into a straight, good human being. We decided, especially after the doctor strongly encouraged us. But we did not need that any more; our decision had been made.”

The months that then came—you will forget them as little as I ever will. How well I felt and looked. How confidence and trust returned, and love to others. But above all, the sacred experience of the new being that was growing inside me. How I felt life for the first time. How it got stronger from week to week, more lively, so that towards the end real waves could be seen and felt in my abdomen. How we loved our little one,
when it stretched and moved in all directions at once. How also you loved me, me, your wife who was now to become the mother of your child!

Then came the request for you to leave, and thus the first heavy obstacle, with which we had grappled before, became suddenly cruelly real and imminent. I believe we stood up to the test, both of us. Me too, although I revolted more against the thought that the unity of the three of us was to be torn apart before we could have given it a firm content. As hard as all that was: the only consoling factor in it was the tiny human being that was growing in me, part of you and me, that would remain in me while you were gone, that would wait for you when you would come back to us.

Eva ended this diary entry by describing her feelings as her “hour came closer”:

I learned new things every day, learned to be alone, to spend the night without you, to fight my fear. To my surprise and that of others there was no fear in me of the delivery. And again and again, almost to the last day, new decisions that tested our determination to put personal wishes in back of the objective needs. We passed the tests again and again; but it cost us a lot, so much inner strength.

April 11th came. You were in Washington; I was expecting your call at night. During the day I had worked as usual; did the laundry, cleaned up the apartment, wrote your 1940 story. Late in the afternoon, it started. Erich comes, Herta, I call the doctor. It is still too early to go to the hospital; labor has to become much stronger. But during the night I will probably be ready. I don’t go to a meeting. Herta stays with me. Around 9 o’clock, the phone: you are at the station! Soon you are home, happy with me how well everything seems to work out. We sleep for a few hours. Labor is getting stronger, and towards morning, at around 5 a.m., we get ready to go to the hospital. The drive in the cab through the cold, rainy night into the dawn; you are holding my hand; we are calm and happy.
It took months before Eva could bring herself to write the next entry in this diary. Otto had departed for Europe. On August 19, Eva wrote about the pain of their separation, her fear for his life, and her constant thoughts about the loss of their child:

Almost three months have gone by since I last wrote. In the meantime, you had to leave, and it’s been over two months that we are separated by the ocean. And I have to get used to life with fear for your life; to the waiting from letter to letter, to the moment of coming home after work when the heart stops for a second while the eyes look for the feared telegram; to being alone with the fear; to the will to go on living, to the courage for hope. It is possible, but very, very hard, sometimes so that one feels one cannot carry the burden any longer.

And in addition to everything else, again and again, with the same bitter pain, comes the memory of the tragedy with our child, not wanting and being able to accept fate, the search for the cause, for guilt, living through again every minute of the night of April 12th to 13th. I know it makes no sense; yet I cannot ban thoughts and memory. If you were here, we would talk about it occasionally, we would carry the load together. If you were here, perhaps our second child would already grow. Oh why, why did we have to be hurt so badly?

In the same diary entry, Eva then described in heartbreaking detail the night that Marianne was born and died, as if she believed that writing it down for Otto would somehow relieve the pain of “living through again every minute of the night of April 12th to 13th.” She first described her desire for support during the difficult early hours of labor:

You know how much, even under ordinary circumstances, a friendly gesture, a warm word, mean to me. During that night it almost became a need for survival. The nurse was overworked . . . and nobody else was there because they had sent you away. So I was all alone in these hard hours. And when the pains became heavier, seemed almost unbearable, then I called out for my mother, very softly, so as not to disturb anyone. I don’t
know, do not remember, if I called for you; I believe that in those hours one needs one’s mother.

When her labor intensified, Eva rang for the nurse who came only after a long wait. Eva asked the nurse please to call her physician, Dr. Kautsky. The nurse refused. Eva then experienced “hellish hours” with bleeding and severe pain, “fear to hurt the baby, begging, imploring the nurse to call the doctor . . . not the courage to demand . . . endless loneliness.”

Shortly before 6 a.m. the head nurse heard her cries, and Eva was immediately transported to the delivery room, “bright, clean light, a nurse, an assistant physician.” Eva felt calm—relieved to be surrounded by people. “They say to hold back, the doctor would be there right away—that he is; they put the mask in front of my face, I only hear how my doctor comes quickly, hear myself cry out . . . but no more pains, I am relieved.”

As Eva felt the baby being born, Dr. Kautsky called out, “Why does she bleed so much?” She then heard “from far away, regular clapping, but no baby’s cry” and asked if something was not right. At that moment the baby cried, and the other doctor said, “It’s a lovely little girl, a little Eva.” For a moment, Eva was filled with happiness: “calmness, peace, limitless gratitude to all those who had helped me.”

But she sensed that something was wrong. “Slowly consciousness returns as though it was standing next to me, and asks me: ‘Why doesn’t your first effort go to the attempt to open your eyes, to see your child, your, Otto’s child?’”

Only when I am on the stretcher, in the elevator, I open my eyes, and see the nurse hold my little girl, a little bundle, and she makes a noise—happily, tired, I close my eyes, am being put into a bed, am resting, resting.

Dr. Kautsky called Otto, and he came to her hospital room. Eva wrote in her diary:

Whatever we lived through together—what can equal this moment, where we hold hands, in greatest, purest happiness, in
deep, humble gratefulness. How we feel rich. In the bed next to me is a young woman. She had her baby yesterday, her husband is in the army, and did not get any leave. You can be with me.

You try to see the baby. They put that off until the afternoon, when you’ll come back, to me, to us.

You are leaving, I fall asleep, in deep, happy exhaustion; in the nursery, the newborn babies cry; one of them is our daughter.

Then Dr. Kautsky came back to Eva’s room. He told Eva not to be concerned, but “there had been some breathing difficulties at birth, and in order to be quite sure, he had called a pediatrician in consultation—there is no reason to be afraid; the pediatrician would soon come in himself and report to me in detail.” Here, Eva’s diary ends. When Eva translated this diary years later, she added:

That is the end of the diary. Unbelievable how it brings those hours back. I never saw the baby. They wanted to prosecute the nurse; I felt there was no point—it would not bring the child back. Later, I was told that Marianne was a healthy baby. She had aspirated blood (my blood) at the moment of birth. . . . I was also told that everything had been done to return her to normal breathing—to no avail. As a consolation, they told me that deprivation of oxygen at the moment of birth would leave irreparable brain damage.

In a letter dated May 25, 1944, Eva’s sister Ruth wrote from Johannesburg, “We all learned the sad news about your baby Eva. We all were very shocked about it but those things are not in our hands. I hope you have not lost confidence in starting again when time has come for you again.” Commending Eva on her “courage to be a mother” and noting that “my turn will come when this war has come to an end,” Ruth then turned to the declining health of their mother and the burden it had created for her and others. “For more than two months, Mother has been in bed. She is a very sick woman. I only hope she is getting better soon. It would be horrible if she has to suffer like this for a longer time to come.”

In a letter dated June 4, Eva’s aunt Rahel (her mother’s sister), who also lived in South Africa, expressed her sympathy for the loss of Eva’s
child and her separation from Otto. Attached to that letter was this note from Eva’s mother:

My Darling daughter Ev. I would have written to you earlier if my health had been better. I can’t tell you in words how sad I am about your grievance. I know so well how you were longing for a baby. Please, my Ev, write to me about everything and I wish you best, best health my Darling. Also all the best for Otto. He must come back to you very soon and in best health. Don’t forget to give him my love when you write to him. Please give me his address. Send all my love to our good “Erichen” and my good “Hertakind.” The doctor has been here just now. He comes twice a week. Today I have to stay in bed because I got another injection . . . and bronchitis still troubles me but it is better. If I only could better sleep, my sleep is bad even with drugs. Well, we must hope for better. Ev, I like your snaps [photos] so much. I am longing to be together with all of you my dear children. Keep well. With 1000 heartfelt kisses and all my love! Your Mother

Eva returned to work shortly after Otto’s departure. In a June 22, 1944, letter to her brother Rudi who was serving with the Allied forces in North Africa and Italy, Eva noted that there was “much work, and as much help as possible to others seems at this time the only thing for me to do—you understand that, don’t you?” And by letter dated July 26, Eva told her sister Ruth that she was “up and working again.” Eva added, “It has been a very hard blow; and when you say that it required courage in the first place to have a child now, I can only say that I need all my courage now where I am alone, and could not have the child. You see, I am not young anymore, and that begins to amount to very much in connection with this whole problem. Well, let’s hope that the war may be over soon, and our men come back—then life may begin once more.”

The individual case files of the International Rescue and Relief Committee (IRRC) (the successor to the Emergency Rescue Committee) confirm that Eva was back at work in the summer of 1944. Correspondence from one file provides a poignant example of her work at that vulnerable time. In a letter dated July 10, 1944, to Dr. Ernst
Jurkat of Princeton University, Eva wrote, “You, no doubt, will be interested to know that we just got a cable from Switzerland containing the following information: ‘Dora Jurkat is liberated from camp, lives now at Criens with son. Mother Theresa Bergass arrived in Switzerland several weeks ago. Money arrives regularly via Quakers. We pay the necessary difference for their maintenance.’” In Dr. Jurkat’s reply to Eva dated July 25, he expressed his gratitude that the IRRC had made it possible for his wife and son to be reunited:

It was with great pleasure, that I received your letter of July 10th informing me about the cable you have received from Switzerland regarding my family. . . . I certainly am very grateful to your organization for paying the necessary difference for the maintenance of my family thus making possible that my wife can live in liberty and together with our son. The separation of mother and son was a constant worry for me knowing how much it means for both of them to have each other.3

One can imagine the combination of gratification and grief that Eva felt from her role in helping bring a mother and child together at that time. Eva’s rescue and relief work was part of her continuing embrace of the ISK-driven duty to do what she could to help others in need. That work also helped relieve the pain of the loss of her child and her second separation from Otto.