Eva and Otto

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32. A New Life

Following VE Day, Eva had been hoping—and beginning to believe—that Otto was on his way home. But in Eva’s letter of May 11, 1945, she referred to a letter from Otto that must have been deeply disappointing to her. She told Otto that his letter of May 3 “makes one thing clear . . . that nothing has been decided as yet as to whether or not you will ask for a discharge [from the army], or whether you will, after consultation with friends, apply for a new assignment. And that means that we have to be patient for a little while longer, which I promise you to be, dearest.” Eva then presented the reasons she believed Otto should ask for his discharge.

Eva first assured Otto that she did not want to push him into doing something he did not want to do, or hold him back from doing what he thought was right. But because they were not together to discuss this, she told Otto that if he decided to stay in Europe and accept a new assignment, she wished he would explain fully the reasons for his decision: “As far as I can see, the cons are very much stronger than the pros, and I would like to understand as much as possible your decision.”

Eva then presented her own views. She conceded, “There is of course a strong personal element in it, and I do not for a moment wish to disguise it.” But apart from the personal element, she told Otto that because the war in Europe was over, their “contribution to any constructive work” could best be made independently—not as part of Otto’s continuing work with the U.S. Army and the OSS:

You enlisted for the duration of the war in Europe, you are over 42, and the Army regulations say plainly that it is up to you to
ask for your discharge. I don’t think that anybody would feel that you neglect a duty if you take this opportunity now. And what you, what we, do later on will depend upon possibilities that offer themselves, once you are back in civilian life.

Eva then weighed the benefits of Otto’s return against his possible future contribution with the army in Europe. She told him that their “interests of being together, of planning to live and work together, have a much heavier weight” than they did before the military victory in Europe. “This phase is over, and whatever anyone can do now, we should not have any illusions about its having any far-reaching importance. . . . Therefore the time has come now, I feel, where our interest to work together can be put forward strongly, even if it means that temporarily you or I will not be at a place where we can be of some value.”

Eva noted that it was difficult to explain all of this in writing, but she did not want to miss an opportunity to make their interest in being together as clear as possible. “I realize of course that I can judge the situation from here only, and that some angle of it might look different from your end. But not the general principle . . . and I would need very strong arguments indeed in order to be convinced that another course is called for.” She concluded:

Chéri, with all these dry words—do you feel how I love you, how I miss you, how these days when I thought you might walk in at any moment, I was and looked [like] a different person, how hope and energy and confidence came back to me? Maybe I should not say this because it might look as if I tried to influence you. You know that . . . whatever you decide, I will carry on, schlecht und recht (bad and good). But I would be a miserable hypocrite if I did not admit that in a deeper sense, only life with you is life for me. Do you understand me?

Eva did not have to wait long. In her letter of May 13 she wrote, “This minute I get your cable saying that you will probably be home within a month. Can you imagine how I feel, how relieved, how grateful.”

Otto had been offered a commission if he would sign up for another year of service with the OSS, but he respectfully declined. As he later recalled:
I was only too eager to go home. And before long, I was crossing the Atlantic again, back to New York.

On October 1, 1946, Kathy was born. Eva wrote in her 1979 memoir:

Impossible, without going into too many details, to describe our joy about and with you children. Kathy, when I saw you first, and held you, it was the most beautiful experience in my life, that made everything right, seemingly forever.

Of course, this decision to have a family against the dictates of the ISK and to make a new home in America was not an easy one. On December 17, 1945, Eva wrote a letter to Minna Specht, her beloved and respected teacher at the Walkemühle and the ISK’s founding educator. Eva tried to explain why she no longer could support some of the restrictive rules of the ISK. She first noted that she was sure Specht would understand that “it is not disloyalty when I and some other former students of the school [the Walkemühle] do not wish to see much of our experiment repeated.” She assured Specht that she was not “rejecting the foundation of our educational work.” Instead, Eva wanted to explain the serious limitations she saw in its practical application. Above all, she wanted Specht to understand her disagreement with the ISK’s view that a meaningful commitment to its important work precluded its members from marriage and having children:

Today I firmly believe that a close and lasting relationship with another human being who has the good fortune to find such a companion, does not interfere with work but rather makes it more productive. That for most women, at a particular point in their life, it lies in the interest of their personal development and the retention and development of their psychological strength, to have children; that this only temporarily disrupts work, and seen over the long term as a result of the organic development of their strength, more springs out for the work than by a constant sapping of strength in the breakdown of this development.
Eva further observed that it was obviously a difficult task to bring one’s obligations to society into accord with the obligations to a new child, but she argued that “we must be successful in this task, if we in any way believe in the future possibility of a cultivated life for the broader masses, in the possibility that a woman does not need to choose to lead her life either as a housewife and mother, or as a fighter who artificially suppresses her natural instincts and is in constant battle with herself.” Eva recognized that “naturally, each woman will have to make her personal decision and have to answer to her own conscience.” But she expressed her deep concern that a person should not be pushed into making this decision at an early age, as the ISK had done with Eva and others:

If someone, as a mature person, with complete awareness of the situation and of herself, makes the decision to forego motherhood, I have great respect for that. What I find dangerous, however, and thus for the future reject, is that young people who cannot fully comprehend the consequences of their decisions because they simply do not know what either the fulfillment or the denial means for their lives, make such decisions. That is indeed what we have done, even though never explicitly but in substance. We therefore, each in our own time and way, had to resolve a conflict in our conscience as events stormed in on us in their full strength—a conflict that I believe people should not impose without emergency.

Please do not misunderstand me, Minna, I am not urging that the task of education is to structure lives as far as possible to be without conflict. That is not possible, for the conflict between desire and duty is always there, and people should learn as young as possible to develop their strength and to be ready to do their duty in developing conflict situations. But in order really to be ready and capable, and not only in words, one must also understand the strengths of desires, one must really live and experience the strengths and significance of natural drives, like love, motherhood—and the significance they have in general and in one’s own special life—in order first through the building of these strengths to reveal the necessary strength for the fulfillment of duty.
I firmly believe that the person who has affirmed these new obligations for the lives of herself and her companion can also be ready for the challenge, and I equally believe that it is the task of education to make people capable of this readiness. Readiness also to devote oneself to a full life; not readiness for asceticism—of which normal human beings are not capable, without taking on such harm that even for work only insignificant strength is left over.

Eva urged her former teacher to understand why she had tried to explain her position:

Now, when you have read these inadequate sentences, Minna, you will understand why I hesitated so long before I even wrote. I have so little time that even this was written in haste, and thus almost necessarily will create new misunderstandings. I believe one should think about these things in depth and calmly in the not-too-distant future, not in self-defense or accusation, but rather with effort, really to draw the right conclusions that come from our experiment that we, ourselves, you as teacher, we as students were engaged in. But in the exchange of letters, this is hardly possible. On the other hand, after your letter that was so warm and full of understanding, I wanted in no case to gloss over these things that have indeed remained unexplained for so long, and somehow stand between us. So please understand this as a humble attempt to explain my position.

Eva obviously hoped that through the kind of open and reasoned debate she had learned at the Walkemühle, both Minna Specht and Willi...
Eichler would ultimately be convinced that she was not abandoning the ideals of the ISK to which she had dedicated such a huge part of her early life. Based on her letters to Eva in response, it appears that Specht understood and respected Eva’s views but did not fully accept them.

Eva remained convinced that her decision to have children was the right one for her. A year and a half later on April 29, 1947, Eva wrote again to Specht. She began: “At this moment, the baby is asleep after a somewhat stormy morning. I have completed my most pressing work; however, two packages still sit here that still need to be completely tied up.” She added, “Katherine’s laundry is still not washed. And this afternoon I need to go into the City to discuss a few things in the [Emergency Rescue] Committee. Katherine will then stay home with a young woman whose child comes to me from time to time when her mother needs to go out.”

After setting this scene, Eva assured Specht: “the chronic lack of time and a much more difficult to achieve mobility to free up myself for other things—these are to date the only serious problems that have emerged in connection with the baby.” Advising Specht that she had “agonized and struggled so long with the preliminary question whether one can assume the responsibility of having children,” Eva wrote:

Today, that question has been answered for me, positively, and I would give a lot if I could sometime explain all my reasons for this to you and others who are involved in bringing up and educating young children. I will not try to do that now; but because you asked me whether I was content, I want to tell you: not only content, but infinitely grateful and happy, actually for the first time I have become a complete person. To see how, out of the tiny, helpless being, a person very gradually emerges, how a body, nerves and senses develop and grow, and gradually spirit and will develop—I find to be a constant wonder.

I am convinced that this growth in its decisive elements follows its own rules, but within that framework it is the task of parents and educators to create the conditions that allow this developing human to become healthy and straight and complete in body and character. That nature may have given her a minimum of healthy conditions and possibilities to develop; that other circumstances beyond our control do not destroy everything
(social catastrophe, war), and that we ourselves might have the capability to help her become a person with inner and outer sensitivities toward public life—these are our shared thoughts and wishes in connection with our child.

Eva acknowledged the need to organize her life with the mutual help of others “so that we do right by our child, but we are not completely devoured by those efforts.” And she conceded that “a certain measure of real limitations is unavoidable in the early years.” She enclosed a small picture of Katherine, “taken on our first outing to the green, when she was just six months old. I think as far as one can now see, she has gotten a lot of Otto’s nature: cheerful, open to other people, very receptive to friendliness, purposeful when she gets something in her head that she wants.” Eva noted that she and Otto were not “completely absorbed with thoughts, worries and joy” about their child. “Sometimes I wish that one could be so fully absorbed; but the state of the world naturally does not permit that. From that, I have answered your question whether we have totally withdrawn, whether we keep in touch with old friends. That contact has, of course, not been severed.”

With firm belief in the core values that she knew they shared, Eva concluded:
That we today consider some aspects of our philosophy as subject to challenge, that we have answered some questions of personal lifestyle in different ways than we previously did, does not touch on what is, for me, the most essential: to find new ways and methods to live a correspondingly ethical life. I am convinced that many of our first efforts were good and unassailable. Many, however, I would not want to see repeated. Many should have been decisively broadened. Each of us who participated in this educational experiment will measure it in retrospect based on his experiences and new insights; I consider it as all of our duty to undertake together an assessment of the experiment. In that sense, therefore, I am here with you and will be here, as long as what is unthinkable for me does not seep in: that dogmatism takes the place of critical reason and an examination of the past gets condemned as heretical. . . .

I must finish now; the little baby needs to eat soon. Minna, I think about you so often, about your difficult life, and from all my heart I wish that something from our enormous efforts will take root in the stony ground.