

EVA AND OTTO PFISTER PAPERS, 1925-1950 2018.448.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW
Washington, DC 20024-2126
Tel. (202) 479-9717
e-mail: reference@ushmm.org

Descriptive summary

Title: Eva and Otto Pfister papers

Dates: 1925-1950

Accession number: 2018.448.1

Creator: Pfister, Eva, 1910-1991

Additional creator: Pfitster, Otto, 1900-1985

Extent: 0.5 linear foot (8 folders)

Repository: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW,
Washington, DC 20024-2126

Abstract: The Eva and Otto Pfister papers consist of diaries and immigration files documenting German Jewish refugee Eva Pfister's experiences in France and New York, her efforts on behalf of her non-Jewish German refugee husband, Otto Pfister, and their socialist colleagues, and the anti-Nazi work of the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK). Eva's four diaries document her teenage years in Goldap, her life as a refugee in France separated from Otto, interned in Gurs, waiting in Montauban for her opportunity to emigrate, her escape over the Pyrénées to Lisbon, and her immigration to the United States aboard the *Nea Hellas*. Her immigration files document her efforts to obtain visas for her ISK colleagues stranded in southern France.

Languages: German, English, French

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open for use, but is stored offsite. Please contact the Reference Desk more than seven days prior to visit in order to request access.

Reproduction and use: Collection is available for use. Material may be protected by copyright. Please contact reference staff for further information.

Preferred citation: (Identification of item), Eva and Otto Pfister papers, 2018.448.1, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Acquisition information: The Eva and Otto Pfister papers were donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2018 by their children Thomas L. Pfister, Peter J. Pfister, and Kathy Pfister.

Separated material: The diary cover was cataloged separately as an object (2018.448.2).

Related material: Thomas L. Pfister, Peter J. Pfister, and Kathy Pfister also donated a copy of the memorial book *In Memory of Our Parents Eva and Otto Pfister*, created by Eva and Otto's children in December 1991, a bound set of the 1926 issues of ISK's *Mitteilungsblatt des Internationalen Sozialistischen Kampf-Bundes*, and sixteen 1935-1940 issues of ISK's *Sozialistische Warte, Blätter für Kritisch-Aktiven Sozialismus* to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. These printed materials were transferred to the Museum's Library.

Accruals: Accruals may have been received since this collection was first processed, see archives catalog at collections.ushmm.org for further information.

Processing history: Processed by Julie Schweitzer, August 2018; Edited by Morgan Voth, August 2019.

Biographical note

Eva Pfister (1910-1991) was born Eva Lewinski in Goldap, East Prussia (now Gołdap, Poland). Her father died before she turned eight years old. Although her parents were Jewish, she declared her departure from the religion at age 13 and never again participated in Jewish religious observances. As she explained to her disappointed family at the time, when she wanted and needed to feel close to God, she would go out into the woods, into nature, or listen to music, and her religious feelings would be genuine. Following her graduation from high school in 1926, she studied in France at Nancy University, where she became fluent in French. She returned to Germany where she became a student of the Göttingen philosopher Leonard Nelson and the educator Minna Specht. Along with her oldest brother, Erich, she worked with a group of non-Marxist socialists formed by Nelson called the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK) that fought against the rise of Nazism.

Because of their Jewish heritage and anti-Nazi activities, Eva and her family had to flee from Germany in 1933. She and her brother formed and operated a vegetarian restaurant in Paris during the 1930's, the proceeds of which were devoted to ISK's anti-Nazi publications and activities. She met Otto Pfister in that restaurant in 1935, and he also became actively involved in anti-Nazi work. When the Nazis invaded Belgium and Luxembourg in May 1940 on their way to their invasion of France, Eva was detained by the French government along with other women of German origin in Paris. She was interned first in the Velodrome d'Hiver in Paris, and then in the Camp du Gurs in southern France. She managed to get released from Gurs on June 19, 1940 and made her way to Montauban and Marseille. In Marseille, she was able to get a visa that had been obtained for her through contacts in America because of the danger she faced as a political refugee and because of her recognized potential to provide help to others when she reached America. After escaping from France to Spain on foot through the Pyrenees, she travelled from Lisbon on the small Greek liner *Nea Hellas* and arrived in New York in October 1940.

Eva then worked tirelessly in NY (with the help of a special group of Americans including those working with the Emergency Rescue Committee) to assist other refugees in Europe who were desperately seeking the life-saving visas to permit their escape from Marseille to the U.S. As part of her efforts she met three times with Eleanor Roosevelt to advocate for the issuance of visas for particular individuals, including Otto Pfister, and corresponded with others, such as Albert Einstein, who knew and could vouch for the character of the refugees who were seeking visas. While in New York during the war, Eva also worked with the Labor Section of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), headed by Arthur Goldberg, helping to gather anti-Nazi intelligence information in secret correspondence with an ISK colleague, Rene Bertholet, who was engaged in resistance efforts in Europe. Some of this information was also transmitted to the British secret wartime organization, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). She married Otto Pfister following his immigration to the United States in April 1941.

Otto Pfister (1900-1985) was born in Munich to Catholic parents. Although he did well in school as a child and loved to read, his family did not have the money to allow him to continue his formal education. At the age of 14, he was apprenticed as a cabinet-maker. Health problems prevented him from being conscripted in the Germany army in World War I, and he produced hand-dovetailed ammunition boxes as an apprentice in Munich during the war. Having been deprived of higher education, Otto developed a desire for learning and seeing the world. He chose not to adopt his family's Catholic religion, but instead found God in the miracles of nature and in the capacity of human beings to build, create art and music, and help each other.

When he was 20 years old, Otto left Munich and his family for Rome where he worked at his craft and learned to love the Italian language, music, opera, art, and people. When Mussolini took over, he packed up his tools and moved to France, first to Nice and then to Paris where he absorbed the French language, poetry, and music and worked at his craft during the 1930's. He met Eva Lewinski in 1935 in the vegetarian restaurant she and her brother Erich operated to support their anti-Nazi work, and Otto and Eva began a relationship. Otto became actively involved in anti-Nazi work with the ISK in Paris, including dangerous resistance work following Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 and the outbreak of war between Germany and France. He was captured by the Nazis in Luxembourg on May 9, 1940, as German troops marched through Belgium and Luxembourg on their way to Paris. Pretending to be a French citizen, he was confined with French army officers in a prisoner of war camp ("Oflag") in Silesia. He managed to survive, obtain his release, and find his way back to Paris. He made his way south to Montauban and Marseille where, through the help of Eva, Eleanor Roosevelt, and others in America, he managed to obtain a visa to come to the United States in April 1941.

Otto married Eva Lewinski in New York and enlisted for service in the U.S. Army and the OSS. Shortly after the tragic death of their first child in childbirth, he was sent overseas and served in England, Belgium, and France. His unit followed the allied troops into Paris after its liberation. Otto and Eva were reunited in New York after the war.

Scope and content of collection

The Eva and Otto Pfister papers consist of diaries and immigration files documenting German Jewish refugee Eva Pfister's experiences in France and New York, her efforts on behalf of her non-Jewish German refugee husband, Otto Pfister, and their socialist colleagues, and the anti-Nazi work of the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK). Eva's four diaries document her teenage years in Goldap, her life as a refugee in France separated from Otto, interned in Gurs, waiting in Montauban for her opportunity to emigrate, her escape over the Pyrénées to Lisbon, and her immigration to the United

States aboard the *Nea Hellas*. Her immigration files document her efforts to obtain visas for her ISK colleagues stranded in southern France.

Eva's "Goldap" diary documents her teenage years in Goldap and her experiences with anti-Semitism. Her January-May 1940 diary documents the period between Otto's detention in a French internment camp and the eve of Eva's internment in Gurs. She did not know at the time whether Otto was still alive, and her entries, directed to Otto, focus on their first meeting at the vegetarian restaurant in Paris, the early development of their relationship, and her reflections about their separation and the uncertainty of their future. Her "Blue Book" diary dates from May to September 1940, and her entries were addressed to Otto who, unknown to Eva at that time, had been taken prisoner by the Nazis in Luxembourg. Eva's entries include descriptions of Eva's internment by the French government as an "enemy alien" at the Vélodrome d'Hiver and Camp de Gurs and descriptions of her release and refuge in Montauban. Documents inserted into the diary's back pocket include Eva's certificate of liberation from Gurs and seven letters from Eva to Otto. Documents inserted into the diary's front pocket include photographs of Eva, Otto, and the gravestone of Otto's mother and a postcard from Eva to Otto. Eva's "Lisbon diary" includes descriptions of her escape over the Pyrénées, her efforts in Lisbon to obtain a place on a ship to America, and her reflections on board the *Nea Hellas* to New York.

Immigration files comprise Eva's file titled "Visa efforts" and include correspondence and documents pertaining to her work in America to obtain visas for her ISK colleagues stranded in southern France, including Otto. Correspondents include Eva and Otto Pfister, Fritz and Katia Adler, Paul Benjamin, Mary Lane Charles, Eliot Coulter, Albert Einstein (photocopies), Dorothy Hill, S.M. Levitas, F. Wilhelm Sollmann, Josef Luitpold Stern, Malvina Thompson, Avra M. Warren, George Warren, and Sumner Welles. Additional documents include Eva's memorandum describing her December 1940 conference with Eleanor Roosevelt, her November 1940 speech encouraging efforts to rescue endangered refugees, a January 1941 clipping from The Cleveland Press about Eva's family, clippings about Einstein, a photograph of Fritz Adler, and brief biographies and contact information for ISK colleagues seeking visas. Among the refugees Eva tried to help were Nora Block, Wilhelm Herzog, Hermann Platiel, and Herta Walter.

System of arrangement

The Eva and Otto Pfister papers are arranged as two series:

Series 1: Diaries, 1925-1941

Series 2: Immigration files, circa 1940-1950

Indexing terms

Pfister, Eva, 1910-1991

Pfister, Otto, 1900-1985

Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund.

Gurs (Concentration camp)

Jews--Poland--Goldap.

Jews--Germany--Munich.

Jews--Germany--History--1933-1945.

Jewish refugees--France.
Jewish refugees--New York.
World War, 1939-1945--Jews--Rescue--France.
Anti-Nazi movement.
Socialists--Germany--History--20th century.

Gołdap (Poland)
France.
Lisbon (Portugal)
New York (NY)
United States--Emigration and immigration--20th century.

Correspondence.
Diaries.
Photographs.

CONTAINER LIST

Series 1: Diaries, 1925-1941

Folder	Title
1 of 8	"Goldap diary," 1925-1926
2 of 8	"January-May 1940" diary, 1940
3 of 8	"The Blue Book," diary, 1940
4 of 8	"The Blue Book," certificate and correspondence inserted in back pocket, 1940-1941
5 of 8	"The Blue Book," photographs and postcard inserted in front pocket, 1934, 1940-1941
6 of 8	"Lisbon diary," 1940-1941

Series 2: Immigration files, approximately 1940-1950

Box/Folder	Title
7-8 of 8	"Visa efforts," circa 1940-1950 (2 folders)