

Eva Kollisch, Lesbian Rights Advocate and Memoirist, Dies at 98

A former refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria, she became an openly lesbian voice in the women's movement and a key leader in feminist studies.

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Eva Kollisch in 2015. She escaped Vienna before World War II and later become an activist and an academic who wrote two memoirs. Mary-Elizabeth Gifford

Eva Kollisch, who escaped Nazi-occupied Austria when she was a teenager to become an American professor and memoirist who broke new ground in

feminist studies and championed equal rights for lesbians, died on Oct. 10 at her home in Manhattan. She was 98.

The cause was a chest infection, her son, Uri Berliner, said.

The author of two memoirs, “Girl in Movement” (2000) and “The Ground Under My Feet” (2007), Ms. Kollisch taught for 30 years at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., where, with [Gerda Lerner](#), [Joan Kelly](#) and [Sherry Ortner](#), she helped introduce a foundational women’s studies curriculum.

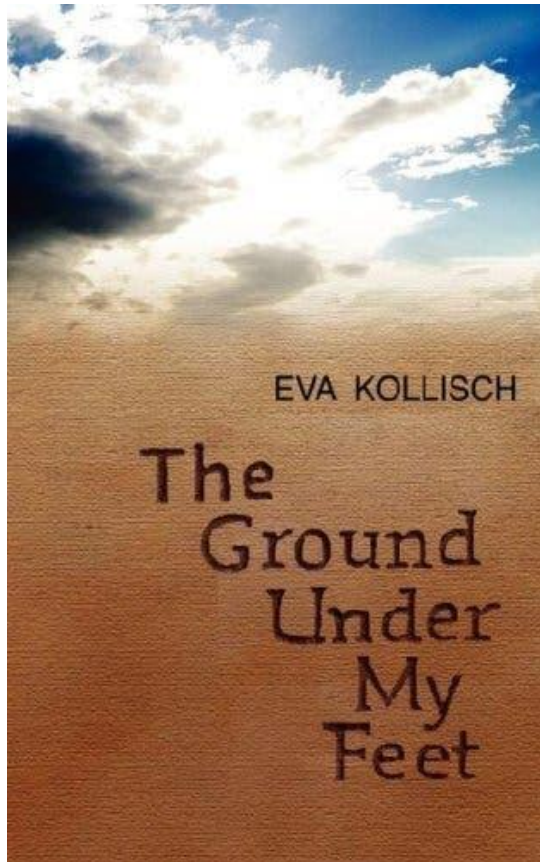
Professor Lerner recalled in [an interview](#) in 2000: “We took four faculty: Joan Kelly for Renaissance, myself for American history, Eva Kollisch for literature and [Sherry Ortner](#) for anthropology. And we worked together, and we designed the course.” It became the basis for a pioneering graduate program in feminist studies.

Ms. Kollisch was an activist from an early age: She joined the Trotskyist Workers Party in the mid-1940s, though she ultimately became disillusioned with its rigidity and bureaucracy. She never wavered in her opposition to the war in Vietnam and was arrested twice in protests.

She was unusually candid for the time about gay rights, and about her own sexual orientation. In an interview for the Smith College Voices of Feminism Oral History Project in 2004, she explained that she never felt entirely comfortable revealing her private life but believed she was, in a way, obligated to herself and to the gay and lesbian rights movement.

“You know, I’m one of these people for whom the emotional, sexual, private life is a very private thing,” she said. “It was a real burden to me to have to discuss it and to make it public, because it doesn’t feel quite natural to tell people who don’t know you whom you love, or why you love them.”

She added: “To me, it’s amazing that straight people don’t understand that this is not a choice we make because we are exhibitionists, you know, because we have no sense of boundaries or discretion. It’s about our own survival and self-respect that we have to do it.”



Ms. Kollisch's memoir "The Ground Under My Feet" documents, in part, her childhood and her time spent in Nazi-occupied Austria. Hamilton Stone Editions

Eva Maria Kollisch was born on Aug. 17, 1925, in Vienna. Her mother, Margarete (Moller) Kollisch, was a poet, journalist and translator. Her father, Otto, was an architect.

Raised in a prosperous, secular Jewish family outside Vienna, she recalled facing antisemitism from the age of 6. At times, she said, she was beaten up and called a "dirty Jew."

When she was 13 and the Nazis annexed Austria, she could no longer continue her education with other Austrian girls and was sent to a boarding school in Vienna for Jewish girls. In one of her first acts of public protest, she and a friend briefly alighted on a park bench from which signs warned that Jews were explicitly forbidden.

“It was defiance, refusing to be treated as some unspeakable kind of person who’s not allowed to sit on a bench,” she recalled. “So that’s activism.”

In 1939, her parents placed her and her brothers on a Kindertransport train, part of the rescue operation that took about 10,000 Jewish children out of occupied Europe to safety in the Netherlands and England in the months before World War II erupted that September. The parents of most of the children who were rescued died in the Holocaust.

Eva and her family were lucky: She and her brothers were united with their parents in New York in 1940. They settled in an apartment on Staten Island. Her mother taught English to refugees, charging 25 cents an hour so she could afford training as a masseuse. Her father sold vacuum cleaners door to door while seeking an American license as an architect.

After graduating from Curtis High School on Staten Island, Ms. Kollisch worked on an assembly line in Detroit, affixing windshield wipers to Jeeps, and as a labor organizer. But she found few recruits for the Trotskyist movement she had joined in high school, and she then soured on it herself because of its domineering, misogynistic male leadership. (Her mother thought that she should run a hotel or a beauty parlor.)

Her embrace of and ultimate disillusionment with the political group was dramatized in [a recent episode of the podcast “Exile,”](#) narrated by Mandy Patinkin and produced for the [Leo Baeck Institute](#), a Manhattan research library for the study of German Jewish history and culture.

Ms. Kollisch’s brief marriage in 1942 to [Stanley Plastrik](#), who helped found Dissent magazine, ended in divorce. She later married Gert Berliner, an Abstract Expressionist artist and fellow refugee who was born in Berlin.

She and Mr. Berliner were among the founders and operators of [Cafe Rienzi](#), a bohemian haunt in a former noodle factory on Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village that was frequented by Allen Ginsberg, James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac and Richard Wright in the early 1950s.

The couple moved to New Mexico, where he painted and she wrote while working as a cook at a uranium mine and as a social worker. There she gave birth to Uri, who is now an editor at NPR. He and a grandson are her only immediate survivors.



Ms. Kollisch, left, and the poet Naomi Replansky. The two married in 2009 and were profiled during the coronavirus pandemic by The New York Times. Mary-Elizabeth Gifford

After the family returned to New York, Ms. Kollisch and Gert Berliner separated in 1959. Ms. Kollisch, who had graduated with a bachelor's degree in German literature from Brooklyn College in 1951, earned a master's in German from Columbia University in 1963, the same year she was hired at Sarah Lawrence. While teaching there, she worked closely with her colleague and Greenwich Village neighbor [Grace Paley](#), the writer and social activist.

In 2009, Ms. Kollisch married her partner, Naomi Replansky, a poet and labor activist.

Ms. Replansky, [who died in January at 104](#), survived the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 and the proliferation of polio in the 1950s. The couple were profiled in 2020 in [The New York Times](#), when much of the world was under lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic.

In the oral history interview in 2004, Ms. Kollisch said that while she remained committed to her fundamental progressive principles, she had to confront additional challenges.

“I am a feminist, I am a Marxist, but I am also very worried about the whole world and humanity, and where humanity is,” she said. “It’s no longer all the men have done these bad things to us, you know — it is not that simple.”