Three big decisions confronted Eva and Otto in 1943 and the beginning of 1944. Each would profoundly impact their lives: the decision by the U.S. government on Eva’s application to extend her visa, the decision by Eva and Otto to have children despite the ISK’s rules, and the decision that Otto should accept a request that he return to Europe on a dangerous secret mission for the OSS.

Eva’s application to extend her visa

While Eva was working secretly with the OSS and openly as a case worker for the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), she applied to extend her own U.S. visa in 1943. As revealed in records released by the FBI in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Eva’s application for an immigration visa at that time was met with vigorous opposition.\(^1\)

Eva had been given an initial extension of her temporary visa until October 21, 1943. Her application for an immigration visa in 1943 was first considered by the “Interdepartmental Committee Number II,” composed of five federal agencies: the State Department (“State”), the War Department (“War”), the FBI, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) (“Immigration”), and the Office of Naval Intelligence (“Navy”). This committee issued an opinion on March 10, 1943, unanimously recommending “unfavorable action” on Eva’s application.\(^2\) The committee stated that “the applicant, by reason of her
birth in Germany, is an alien enemy and as such excludable unless some benefit is seen in the regularization of her status.” It is apparent that the committee disregarded Eva’s years of anti-Nazi work and was unaware of her clandestine work with the OSS.

The committee further noted that “one of the intelligence services has furnished a report concerning sponsor [Benjamin] Zevin which indicates he is secretary of the Cleveland Civil Liberties Union. This information may well be considered derogatory.” Benjamin Zevin, one of Eva’s sponsors for this application, was an executive with the World Publishing Company in Cleveland.

On May 17, 1943, the “Interdepartmental Visa Review Committee A” interviewed Eva. In response to a question, Eva informed the committee that her brother Erich had been a member of the Association of Free Germans for some time but had resigned as a member over a year earlier. Following that interview, the committee recommended withdrawal of the case “pending the receipt of a report concerning the International Rescue and Relief Committee, the employer of the applicant, as well as a report on the Association of Free Germans.”

On the afternoon of October 5, 1943, the Visa Review Committee met again to consider Eva’s application. The minutes of this meeting show that four of the five members of the committee (State, War, FBI, and Navy) recommended against granting an immigrant visa to Eva, and only one member (Immigration) recommended in favor of her application.

The opinion of the majority of the committee provides a sobering example of how bits and pieces of information can be used to create a distorted picture of a refugee. The stated reasons for the majority’s recommendation against granting Eva’s application included her involvement in rescue and relief work for the ERC, erroneous input from an unidentified FBI informant that she was a communist, and suspicions about her sponsor.

The majority noted: “Reports have been submitted by one of the intelligence agencies which indicate that this individual has been active in connection with the ERC since her arrival in the United States and in that connection, has interested herself in Communists who are seeking entry into this country.” The State Department’s representative added his own sharp attack against Eva’s affiliation with the ERC by targeting the work of Varian Fry in Marseille:
Particular attention may be invited to the information concerning Varian Fry, who was sent by the Emergency Rescue Committee to France and who established in Marseille the Comité Americain de Secours, with which the applicant [Eva] was affiliated. Mr. Fry was arrested by the French police and expelled from France for his activities. In about June 1942 the French police raided this office in Marseille, arrested all the personnel and seized all the equipment. . . . The activities of this office were a source of considerable embarrassment to the American Government representative in France.10

It is a sad irony that the State Department was using Eva’s work with the ERC in New York and Varian Fry’s rescue work in Marseille as reasons to deny Eva’s application. As noted earlier, Fry was posthumously honored and named “Righteous Among Nations” by Israel’s Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in 1996 for his rescue work in Marseille. At the award ceremony in Jerusalem on February 2, 1996, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher apologized for the State Department’s treatment of Fry. Christopher stated that “regretfully, during his lifetime, his heroic actions never received the support they deserved from the United States government, particularly the State Department.”11

The majority opinion also relied on an unidentified “confidential informant” to support the erroneous conclusion that Eva was a communist: “As late as January 1943 one of the intelligence agencies [the FBI] was furnished with a list of individuals described as former German Communists, which included the name of Eva Lewinski.”12

The majority opinion further challenged the credibility of Eva’s sponsor. “Information has also been furnished concerning Benjamin David Zevin, which indicates that this individual has continued to employ a Communist regardless of the fact that he is familiar with the individual’s affiliation with the Communist Party. It would appear, therefore, that he definitely cannot be relied on when the best interests of the United States Government are under consideration.”13

Finally, the majority opinion included the separate comments of the State Department’s representative to “emphasize his belief that the presence of this alien in the United States is particularly inimical to our national security.” He asserted, “There is not the slightest doubt in the mind of this representative that she is a rabid Communist.” The majority
concluded that “this granting of an immigration visa to this applicant at
the present time would not be consistent with the best interests of our
Government and disapproval is therefore recommended.”14

In sharp contrast, the dissenting opinion of the INS’s representative
stated that “in so far as the record is concerned, there is no evidence
that the applicant is a Communist or that she has been personally asso-
ciated with any known Communist party or organization.” He added,
“It seems desirable to permit this applicant to change her status to that
of permanent residence, particularly in view of the consideration that
her husband is a legally admitted alien and has declared his intention to
become an American citizen. Furthermore, the record indicates that this
applicant has been actively engaged in anti-Nazi activities.”15

Fortunately for Eva, the administrative Board of Appeals agreed
with the dissenting opinion and found in favor of Eva’s application. A
memorandum dated October 22, 1943, provided the following “Excerpt
from opinion of the Board of Appeals” summarizing its reasons for find-
ing in favor of Eva:

The Board is impressed by the record which this applicant
has made in refugee work and by the commendations which
she has received. It also noted with interest the FBI report of
July 9, 1943 setting forth the Cleveland Press story on her an-
ti-Nazi activities. The record indicates that the applicant has
two brothers serving in the British Army. It also indicates that
she is herself now on the staff of the International Rescue and
Relief Committee, an association whose directors include some
outstanding American citizens. The Board finds benefit in the
applicant’s abilities and in allowing the maintenance of family
unity. The applicant’s record and the excellent support con-
tained in the file give satisfactory evidence that she may be
granted this permit with safety. Accepting the reasons of the
USIS representative in Committee A, the Board recommends
that the permit be granted.16

Only partial information is available about the sources of the false ac-
cusation that Eva was a communist. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had
written to the State Department’s Visa Division on July 9, 1943, with a
“Supplemental Report” about Eva.17 That report reveals that one of the
reasons for this accusation was Eva’s support for the visa applications of Nora Block, Herta Walter, and Hermann Platiel. The FBI’s report quoted the following statement from a Visa Division memorandum:

“The cases of Nora Block and Herta Walter were recommended for refusal because both were sponsored by Leo Gallagher, their brother-in-law, who is an American Communist in Los Angeles. The case of Hermann Platiel, who has recently married Nora Block, is now presented for formal consideration for the first time.”

“The person who is pressing for a favorable consideration of these cases is Eva Lewinski, who entered the United States in October, 1940, under the sponsorship of the American Federation of Labor and who has subsequently sponsored a number of Social-Democrat refugees, including several recommended by the President’s Advisory Committee. Her own integrity is vouched for by Mr. Paul Benjamin, Secretary of the Buffalo Council of Social Agencies, who is well known to Mr. George L. Warren. Miss Lewinski has interviewed Mrs. Roosevelt on behalf of these aliens and a number of others, and Mrs. Roosevelt has passed on their names to Mr. Welles for information and action.”

Interestingly, the FBI’s July 9, 1943, report also advised the State Department that Eva was receiving information from Europe, apparently unaware that this was information that Eva was secretly obtaining for the OSS from René Bertholet:

A confidential source advised on September 27, 1942, that Mrs. Eva Pfister . . . received mail from Zurich, Switzerland, containing extracts from French and German newspapers and other reports relative to the situation of the Jews in Europe and the general effect of the war on the people of captured countries (62-62736-2-13072). . . .

A confidential source on May 1, 1942, advised that Mrs. Eva Pfister . . . was the recipient of clandestine anti-Nazi literature. Some of her associates in the United States and Europe and probably she herself apparently constitute a group who are
working to unite the French people, particularly labor, against their present government. . . . (62-62736-2-3267)\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, the FBI’s report advised:

A reliable confidential source on January 29, 1943, furnished this Bureau with a list of individuals whom he described as former German Communists. Included on this list is the name of Eva Lewinski. (100-200123-4: Bob M.).\textsuperscript{20}

The FBI did not identify the “reliable confidential source” referred to as “Bob M.” But a document that was released in response to a request under FOIA provides important insight into the nature of the list of alleged “former German Communists” he provided to the FBI. It was a list of over 150 names of exiled anti-Nazi Germans who were asked by 8 of those on the list, including Paul Tillich and Eva, to cosign an anti-Nazi declaration dated January 30, 1943.\textsuperscript{21} This declaration marked the tenth anniversary of Hitler’s assumption of power in Germany and denounced the brutal Nazi regime that had “brought disgrace over Germany and immeasurable sorrow over the entire world.” On the top of this list, the informant had typed the following message to the FBI: “All names in the following list which are not followed by a parenthesis remark by me are Communists, fellow travellers or Communist stooges.” Next to some of the names, the informant had typed his notations in parentheses, such as “Socialist,” “innocent Socialist,” “nothing known concerning him,” “completely innocent,” and “right-wing German-American.”\textsuperscript{22}

Eva’s name was among the many anti-Nazis on this list that did not have any such notation from the informant. While some of the more than 150 German anti-Nazis on this list were (or had been) communists at some point in their lives, many of them—including Eva—had not. Among the many other names in the same category as Eva on this list (i.e., without any “exonerating” parenthetical notation from this informant) were Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, Heinrich Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Paul Tillich.

It is deeply disturbing that such a list of German anti-Nazis—prepared and used by exiled Germans to express their strong and united condemnation of the Nazis—would be used by the FBI to support the majority of the Visa Review Committee’s recommendation to deny Eva’s
application. And it is disturbing that the FBI and the majority of the committee relied on the notations of this informant who indirectly and falsely accused Eva of being a communist. It is reassuring that the INS representative and the Board of Appeals rejected that accusation.

Years later, the FBI acknowledged its lack of confidence in the reliability of the information produced by this informant, “Robert M”:

On January 29, 1943, a confidential informant who has furnished both reliable and unreliable information in the past furnished a list of names of persons whom he described as communists, fellow travelers, or communist stooges. Included on this list was the name of Eva Lewinski (not further identified). (Robert M; 100-200123-4).

The U.S. policy of excluding all refugees who were communists was based on the understandable fear of bringing anyone to America who would advocate or participate in the violent overthrow of our system of government. That blanket exclusion did not apply to those affiliated with socialist organizations, but the distinction was easily blurred as evidenced by the response to Eva’s application to extend her visa in 1943.

Although beyond the scope of this book, it bears noting that thousands of Germans, Jewish and non-Jewish, actively opposed and resisted the Nazis before and after Hitler assumed power in 1933. Most of those were members of the German Communist Party or were socialists affiliated with the German Social Democratic Party or various smaller socialist splinter groups such as the ISK, Neu Beginnen (New Beginning), and the Socialist Workers Party. Virtually all of these German anti-Nazis paid dearly for their active political resistance against Hitler. Most were forced into exile. Others were hunted down by the Nazis and incarcerated in prisons and concentration camps, where many were tortured and killed by the Nazis. Because of the Cold War that emerged from the ashes of World War II, historians in Western bloc countries were generally reluctant or unwilling to recognize the personal sacrifice, suffering, and loss of life of socialists and communists in the fight against Hitler.

We do not know if any of the representatives on the Interdepartmental Visa Review Committee or the Board of Appeals were secretly informed of Eva’s role in obtaining intelligence information for the OSS from René Bertholet when they considered her application to extend her visa.
in 1943. As part of a response to a FOIA request and appeal, an index card was found that provides a hint but not an answer. The card refers to a specific 1943 document in the files of the INS, but the document could not be located. The missing document is described as follows:

23/9562 PFISTER, EVA LEWINSKI: Office of Strategic Services Washington, D.C., requests that citizenship appln [application] be expedited. 3/9/43

The request by the OSS to the INS in this missing document in March 1943 might have been a key factor in the INS representative's dissenting vote on the Visa Review Committee in support of Eva's application and in the ultimate ruling by the Board of Appeals in Eva's favor in October 1943.

Another document includes subsequent input from the OSS to the FBI about Eva. In a letter dated January 12, 1944, the director of the OSS's Research and Analysis Branch, transmitted to the FBI one copy of a secret memorandum titled “The German Political Emigration.” This OSS memorandum (declassified and released in response to a FOIA request) does not refer to Eva's work with the OSS. However, it does provide summary descriptions of the various German political groups in exile, including the ISK, and clearly distinguishes the ISK from the German Communist Party. The OSS memorandum accurately refers to the ISK as promoting “non-Marxian Socialism” and states that “in the United States Miss Eva Levinsky-Pfister and Erna Blencke are the two best known members of ISK.” Although the FBI received this information from the OSS a few months after the Board of Appeals had granted Eva's application for an immigration visa in October 1943, it appears likely that the OSS weighed into the process in favor of Eva through some secret channel.

Of course, there is no way of knowing what would have happened to Eva if the committee's recommendation to reject her application had been affirmed by the Board of Appeals in 1943. When her temporary visa expired on October 21, 1943, would America have given her a further extension of her temporary visa or tried to deport her to Vichy France for further deportation to Nazi Germany?

Eva did not have access to all of this information about the deliberations of these Visa Review Committees, including the false statements
made about her. Those false statements would certainly have disturbed her, but they likely would not have changed her positive impression of America. The unsuccessful and unfounded opposition to the extension of her visa would not have outweighed the gratitude she felt for the help she had received from individual Americans such as Dorothy Hill and Paul Benjamin; organizations such as the Jewish Labor Committee, the American Federation of Labor, and the ERC; government officials such as Sumner Welles, Eliot Coulter, George Warren, and Hiram Bingham; and, of course, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Above all, Eva was moved by the warmth, openness, and lack of blind deference to authority that she saw in these Americans who were willing to help her.

The decision to have a child

During these years of intense immersion in the ISK’s work in Europe and America, Eva never lost her deep desire to have children. This desire was revealed in her earlier writings—perhaps most clearly in the poems she had written in Paris and in her letter to Otto about her admiration of the mother in *The Grapes of Wrath* (“And that mother—the incarnation of love that never tires—how I would like to become like her!!”). Yet her commitment to the ISK and its battle against the Nazis—and the passage of time—were conspiring to foreclose that for her.

In Eva’s letter to her brother Rudi and sister Ruth in South Africa on May 31, 1943, in which she had explained why she and Otto and her brother Erich had been unable to provide financial assistance to her mother, she had also commented,

Apart from all the trouble and hard things of life, I personally know that I am very privileged, because Otto and I, we know that there are few people who are so happy together, and can stay together at least for a while. Otto is over draft age, and will therefore, since he is working in a defense industry, probably stay at home for the duration. What comes after that is in shadow, as far as we are concerned—we don’t exactly expect an easy time—but about that in one of my next letters. Anyhow, the uncertainty of the future, and some other concerns, have up to now prevented us from building a family of our own—and
sometimes I fear that time will make this provisional decision a permanent one.

Eva obviously was not free to speak openly about the tension she felt all those years between her desire for a family and her political commitment to the ISK with its idealistic, ethically driven focus on assisting others in need. During the past decade of Eva’s life, this had meant her total commitment to the fight against fascism and deferring any thought of having children.

As revealed in Eva’s writings, she was both remarkably rational and deeply emotional. From her reports to ISK leader Willi Eichler and her correspondence with government officials seeking to obtain visas, we see an unusually strong, disciplined, and rigorous thinker with an extraordinary work ethic. From her private diary entries and letters to Otto, we see a person with a profound emotional need to love and be loved—a person moved by poetry, nature, and music.

These tensions in her inner life were obviously affected by all she had endured: the loss of her father when she was eight; her difficult relationship with her mother, at first relating to her as an adult friend when only a child, and then being told to back away and act like a child; her childhood experiences with anti-Semitism toward her father before his death and toward her by her best childhood friend in school; the demands and restrictions of her early ISK training that resulted in an emotional shutdown that nearly caused her death; her separation from the first person she truly loved, Rudi L., because of her forced exile to Paris; and the burdens of war, from the internment in the Vel’ d’Hiv and behind barbed wire at Gurs, to months of uncertainty about Otto’s fate, to the duty call to go to America an ocean away from Otto and her adopted home of France, to her frantic work in New York to help rescue others while knowing that multitudes of innocent human beings in Europe were being abandoned and “deported” by the Nazis.

Having survived all of this, Eva’s desire to have a child with Otto remained strong. As she had experienced with her decision to marry Otto, Eva knew that a decision to have a child would likely be viewed as a selfish betrayal of ISK principles by her friends in the ISK who had educated her, with whom she had worked so closely for so many years and whom she still respected deeply. But after much thought, Eva reached her own conclusion that the ISK’s rule against having children
was ultimately flawed. She hoped that she could have a dialogue with her ISK teacher Minna Specht and ISK leader Willi Eichler about this. Eva wanted to try to convince them that it would be in the best interest of the organization to change this rule so those women who wanted to have children would not be foreclosed from productive work with the ISK.

But Eva did not wait for a change in the ISK’s rule. She was running out of time. Eva’s and Otto’s desire for a child was too great to sacrifice. In the summer of 1943, they finally made the decision. Eva became pregnant; and despite a war-torn world, they looked forward with hope to the birth of their first child.

The decision that Otto should participate in a dangerous OSS mission in Europe

At the beginning of 1944, ISK leader Willi Eichler asked Otto if he would be willing to go back to Europe to participate in an anti-Nazi mission. In her 1979 memoir, Eva briefly described that request and its terrible timing:

> Once more, we had to make a far-reaching decision. I was expecting our first child when Otto was asked by friends in Europe if he would volunteer again, and to that effect join the American Army in a special unit which concerned itself with strengthening the anti-Nazi forces behind the lines. His experience after his capture in Luxembourg, his knowledge of languages, his personality, seemed to indicate that he could again do very useful work towards the defeat of the Nazis.

> We were torn up about this. It had taken a great deal of thought to finally reach the decision to have children, and to look forward to a life of our own, after the war. We both agreed that Otto could not say no, and that he was morally obligated to go. So, he enlisted, went into training, and was to be sent overseas just as the baby was due.

In a brief letter to Eichler dated February 1, 1944, Otto confirmed his agreement to participate in this mission, stating simply: “Thanks for your letter. This is just a short note to let you know that I agree to
participate in the work that you mention. The necessary steps are now being taken for my coming over which will be arranged through my induction in the Army.” Otto was willing to rely on Eichler’s judgment without knowing any details about the mission: “I quite understand that it was not possible for you to explain more in detail the nature of the work; and since you say that it is politically along lines which we can accept, I feel that this is a sound enough basis for my decision.” Otto concluded, “I hope that we will be able to discuss the work and many other problems soon directly.”

It is clear from the René-Eva correspondence that the new Labor Section of the OSS, headed by Arthur Goldberg, was eager to tap into the intelligence resources of anti-Nazi political refugees from Europe and had been doing that with Eva and others since 1942. Otto’s mission, as initially envisioned by the OSS, was very different and involved high risk: he was to be dropped by parachute behind enemy lines to assist the anti-Nazi underground as the Allied troops pushed into Germany.

Otto’s OSS personnel file is now declassified. A one-page form dated February 21, 1944, signed by “Arthur J. Goldberg, Major, AUS,” stated that “Pfister, Otto (civilian)” was to be “inducted in District of Columbia.” Typed under the heading “Intended Assignment (Location and Job Description)” was the following:

Secret and hazardous mission in ETO [European theater of operations]. Project involves considerable number of recruits capable of passing as natives of France and possessing background in labor or political movements in that country. Projected use of recruits is highly confidential and urgent.

The form stated that Otto’s “Language Facility” is “French and German,” that “special OSS training will be required,” and that he had already been interviewed. Under the heading “Additional Essential & Special Qualifications,” Goldberg wrote:

a) Language qualification is unusual, involving native fluency or sufficient degree of proficiency to permit development of such fluency; b) physical condition must be good; c) willingness to undertake, on a voluntary basis, hazardous duties overseas is essential; d) geographical knowledge of the country involved is important.
Goldberg concluded: “This man possesses these unusual qualifications to a high degree and is urgently needed.”

Otto’s mission was to infiltrate enemy-occupied territory as a civilian agent, not as a uniformed soldier. Yet the decision was made that his return to Europe for this mission would be facilitated if he was sent as a soldier. As noted in a document in his OSS personnel file, “He was recruited during a period when transportation was extremely tight for civilians and for this reason it was decided to enlist him in the Armed Services in order to expedite his transportation and to avoid other questions having to do with his alien status.” His enlistment in the U.S. Army encountered some initial hurdles.

Although Otto’s background made him uniquely qualified for the special requirements of his OSS mission, the U.S. Army had to make exceptions to its usual qualification standards to allow his induction. He was too old: “he was placed in the Army although he was considerably over-age [forty-four years old] and was not otherwise subject to such service.” It is understandable that such an exception could be made without being conspicuous. Otto looked significantly younger than his age.

Otto also had been very nearsighted since his early childhood and needed to wear thick corrective glasses. Without them, he could not see clearly beyond a few feet. When Otto was examined for enlistment at Fort Myer, Virginia, on April 10, 1944, his vision was determined to be a “disqualifying physical defect.” A memorandum seeking a waiver stated that “it is now desired to obtain a waiver of the physical defect discovered in the physical examination at the earliest possible date.” The memorandum presented the following reasons for the waiver:

Mr. Pfister is intended for a secret hazardous mission for which he possesses qualifications which cannot be duplicated. Further training for this mission and the execution of the mission itself requires that he have military rather than civilian status. The nature of the mission is such that defective vision is not a material consideration and will not interfere with the projected mission.

One cannot help but wonder why defective vision was not considered a material consideration for the proposed mission of parachuting behind enemy lines—given the risk and dire consequences of losing or breaking his glasses. However, the OSS obviously believed that the risk
was outweighed by the potential benefit to the mission of Otto’s special qualifications.

Despite the uncertainties still facing Eva and Otto at the end of 1943, the anticipation of their first child brought them joy. The following year when Otto was in Europe with the OSS, Eva wrote to him and recalled “those late Sunday afternoons” in the winter of 1943 when they sat together in their small apartment in New York listening to chamber music concerts on radio station WQXA:

And we were sitting in our music corner, our hearts often overflowing with happiness, because the music—it was Beethoven—touched us at the innermost feelings, and we were together, one in our hearts, and we lived with gratitude and humbly towards the day when our child would be with us, our child that was growing in me, and filled my heart with an almost unknown tenderness towards every living being.31