Afterword

Our learning process while researching and writing this book produced a number of “stories within the story”—about how we learned of information that was not known to our parents or, for reasons we believe we now understand, our parents chose not to tell us. These discoveries differed in gravity and impact on us. Each was a meaningful surprise.

Otto’s anti-Hitler gramophone recording in 1936

Our parents told us that our father had been involved in distributing anti-Nazi literature while working with the Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund (ISK) in Paris. We recall our father telling us, when we were very young, that some of the anti-Nazi material was on paper so thin that it could be swallowed if he were captured. In fact, Otto had retained some of that delicate paper, and he would carefully unfold it to show us how thin it was. As children, we were intrigued with the idea that our father would have had to eat secret papers to avoid getting caught by the Nazis.

In the course of our research, Peter discovered that Otto’s voice was used on anti-Hitler phonograph recordings produced by the ISK in Paris and smuggled into Germany. We were able to obtain the transcript of one of these recordings from historian Ursula Langkau-Alex, a senior research fellow at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. As described in Chapter 7, the recording strongly encouraged Germans to vote “no” in the March 29, 1936, referendum in which Hitler sought ratification of the military occupation of the Rhineland.
We were also able to obtain a digital recording of the actual sound of this gramophone recording that has been preserved in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, Germany. It was stunning for the three of us to listen to the clearly recognizable voice of our father on this recording, predicting in 1936 that the result of Hitler’s aggression and provocations “can only be war” and that Hitler “will rattle his saber so long that he will unleash a world conflagration.” It was also sobering for us to learn that the Nazis considered this recording to be an act of high treason, adding to the danger that Otto faced when he was captured by the Nazis in May 1940.

Otto’s anti-Nazi sabotage work during the Drôle de Guerre

We knew from our parents that Otto was taking some kind of anti-Nazi materials to Luxembourg on May 9, 1940, and was captured by the Nazis when they invaded the following morning. Because our parents told us that Otto had been involved in distributing anti-Nazi literature while working with ISK members in Paris, we assumed that he was making the trip on May 9 for that purpose.

But we never asked our parents for answers to any of the following questions: What had our father done in continuing to work against the Nazis after his release from French internment at the beginning of February 1940? Who was he meeting in Luxembourg on that trip of May 9? What was he delivering? Why was he in such serious danger if he fell into the hands of the Nazis?

During our research, Peter found a chapter in a book by Jef Rens, a Belgian labor leader, titled “René Bertholet et Otto Pfister.” Rens described his encounters with Otto and René Bertholet as being “among the most unique that I had in my life.” We were shocked when we read Peter’s translation of Rens’s vivid description of his first meeting with Otto in Rens’s office in Brussels—a meeting in which Otto quietly opened his heavy briefcase and showed Rens the bombs.

This was an unsettling revelation for all of us. Our father had always been a gentle person, a lover of peace. We felt that our parents were open with us about their early lives in Europe, both in conversations and in their 1979 memoir. We knew that our father had participated in
resistance efforts against Hitler for years in Paris, but we had never heard anything from our parents about bombs.

Much of the information presented by Rens in his book corroborated other facts we knew, but not all of it. So, we searched for more information to confirm or refute what he had written about Otto’s activities during this period.

We first looked again, more closely, at the writings our parents had left for us. In an early draft of her memoir, Eva described Otto’s internment by the French at the beginning of the war in September 1939. Following his release from that internment, she explained, “He participates actively in the war against the Nazis. He travels, sees and helps people who work against the German war machine. Each of these trips is fraught with danger. The last one he takes is the morning before the ‘Blitzkrieg’—he is in Luxembourg and I am not to know whether he survived until much later when I am in America” (our emphasis).

We also found a brief but clear statement in a memoir written by Tom Lewinski, the son of our mother’s brother Erich. Tom wrote that after being released from internment by the French, Otto took up “active sabotage work against the Germans.”

Why had our parents chosen not to volunteer information to us about the specific nature of our father’s resistance work during this period? Perhaps they wanted to remain true to the ISK’s commitment of strict confidentiality, a commitment that the group had once considered essential to the resistance work and the survival of its members. We also assume that our parents wanted to shield us from knowledge that our father had been compelled by circumstances to participate in such violent activities on behalf of the French government—even though this was during a time of openly declared war between France and Germany and the target was the Nazi war machine.

Still, it was unsettling to learn that our parents had not revealed this to us, and we wanted more information. As explained in Chapters 7 and 8, we learned more about how ISK members worked closely with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) in anti-Nazi resistance efforts before and during World War II. In our further research about the ISK-ITF relationship, we found numerous references to Hans Jahn as not only a leader of the ITF but also an active organizer and participant in sabotage efforts against Hitler’s war machinery. Such
activities, with the assistance of the ISK, increased dramatically during the Drôle de Guerre.4

Putting these pieces together, Peter recalled that our father had made a vague reference in the 1979 memoir to the name of the person he was going to meet on May 9 in Luxembourg. He reviewed our father’s description of his May 1940 trip to Luxembourg: “I arrived in Luxembourg, went to Hans J., unloaded my anti-Hitler material.” “Hans J.” had to be Hans Jahn, and the words “unloaded my anti-Hitler material” now had a clear and chilling meaning.

We did not have much hope of finding any contemporaneous French records of the ISK’s collaboration with the ITF and the intelligence unit of the French Army, the Fifth Bureau, in their efforts to sabotage Nazi war matériel transports during the Drôle de Guerre. We assumed that any such documents would have been included in the bonfires of documents destroyed by the French government before the Nazis marched into Paris.5

Given that British intelligence had also been involved in these sabotage efforts by the ITF at that time, we wondered if British documents still existed with information about this activity. As explained in Chapters 8 and 25, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was the secret British agency involved in espionage and sabotage operations before and during World War II. We discovered that many previously confidential SOE files had been released to the public in recent years and that a private British company had microfilmed many of those files. An index to these files revealed three microfilm reels relating to the ISK and its collaboration with the SOE as well as an SOE file titled “Johannes Jahn.”6 The documents in this SOE file provided vivid confirmation that Jahn was involved in blowing up German trains during this period.

The French village that gave refuge to Eva

As described in Chapter 10, Eva’s experience in the small farming village immediately after her release from Camp de Gurs in June 1940 had a strong and lasting impact on her. She was able to stay there for only two weeks, because the line of demarcation was set and the village was just within the zone to be occupied by the Nazis. However, the willingness of
these poor villagers to accept her group of endangered German refugees with kindness and generosity gave her hope in the worst of times. As she explained in her 1979 memoir, Eva had not written the name of the village in her diary or correspondence (so she would not endanger the villagers) and could not recall it. This led to her comment: “If I have any regrets about things not done in my lifetime, it is that I was never able to find that little village again, and give thanks to the people, or to their children or grandchildren, who had been so unbelievably good to us.”

When Kathy planned our trip to France in 2011, she had several objectives: to visit the memorial at Camp de Gurs where Eva was interned by the French government because of her German origin in May and June 1940; to visit Montauban, where Eva and others in her ISK group stayed for several months waiting for news about U.S. visas that might allow them to escape; and to hike over the Pyrenees on the same path taken at different times by Eva and Otto. But Kathy’s plans were further driven by a special mission: she wanted to try to identify and visit that small village that had given refuge to Eva. If possible, she hoped to bring some resolution to the regret Eva had expressed in her 1979 memoir that she had forgotten the name of the village and had never been able to convey her gratitude to the villagers or their heirs. Kathy hoped that if we could find this village, someone might still be alive who was a child when Eva was sheltered there.

Eva’s sister-in-law Herta, who had been with the group of ISK members in the village, told Eva that she believed the village was named “Senlies,” but we could find no village with that name and wondered if she had meant Salies de Béarn, a town near Gurs. Kathy noticed that Salies de Béarn was also the return address on the letter Eva wrote to Stern from the village. However, Salies appeared much larger and more urban and prosperous than the small farming village that Eva described.

In a short diary entry written on June 24, 1940, during the time when she was in the village, Eva had written what appeared, on close examination, to be the letter “C” (not the letter “S”) in front of the date. Because Salies de Béarn was exactly on the line of demarcation, Kathy thought it was possible that what we called the “mystery village” may have been a small village whose name began with a “C” that was in the occupied zone just west of Salies de Béarn. She obtained and reviewed detailed local maps of the area around Salies and identified several villages that fit that description. Kathy then wrote to their mayors, briefly
describing our mother’s history during that time and asking if they had any knowledge that could help us locate the village. Jacques Bargell, former mayor of the village of Castagnède, responded that he would be happy to meet with us when we were visiting the area.

To our amazement when we met with Jacques, he said that he had talked with various people in his village and thought that his village, Castagnède, was the one that our mother had described. Even more surprising, he told us that he had found a “witness”: Rosine Fontanieu, who had lived in Castagnède all her life. Rosine remembered that when she was seven years old, a group of German women, with a few children, stayed in the village but had to leave when the Germans came. Jacques then told us that she remembered watching the women as they left the village on foot and described a specific detail: Rosine had told him that one of the women was elderly and had a broken leg and was pushed down the road in a _poussette_ (baby carriage). Eva had described this same detail to us in her 1979 memoir. We were stunned. Considering the timing of the encounter (just before the arrival of the Nazis in Castagnède), the location and nature of the village, and Rosine’s recollection of this group of women, we believed that we had found the village.

Jacques then took us to meet Rosine and her husband Georges in their home in Castagnède, where we sat around their beautiful wooden table and talked with Rosine about her memories. She recounted her recollections of that time as a seven-year-old, including her memory of the elderly woman in the _poussette_. Rosine said she always wondered what had happened to the women after they left Castagnède. She remembered that the people in the village wept when the group left—and, for very different reasons, wept again when the Germans arrived soon thereafter.

So, on September 25, 2011, sitting together in Rosine’s home in the French countryside seventy-one years after our mother had found refuge in her small village, we were able to convey to her the gratitude that Eva had never been able to communicate herself.

Our trip to southern France in 2011 also allowed us to visualize the places referred to in our parents’ writings: the memorial at Camp du Gurs, with its replica of the grim barracks contrasting sharply with the beauty of the countryside and the Pyrenees rising in the background; the train station and graceful bridges over the Tarn River in Montauban; and the “little border town,” Banyuls sur Mer, from where Eva and Otto both began their separate escapes over the Pyrenees. And our hike together
over the Pyrenees allowed us to see the “vineyards and mounts of olive trees without end, and unbelievably blue ocean” as described by Eva in her account of her crossing. Having made the strenuous hike ourselves over the roughly marked trail now named for Walter Benjamin, we could see and feel the “brilliant early morning,” the “top of the mountain,” the “thorny bushes, the rocks” that both of our parents had experienced under such different circumstances over sixty years earlier.7

FOIA requests for records about the granting of U.S. visas to Eva and Otto

On our behalf, Tom sought records about our parents from various U.S. government agencies under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The process was frustrating at best. In essence, the initial agency responses advised us that no such records could be located. We therefore had to pursue several administrative appeals.

A ruling on one of the FOIA appeals directed the FBI to conduct a further search for the documents we requested. The FBI in turn directed other agencies to search again for the requested records. Ultimately, we were able to obtain copies of a number of important documents about the granting of Eva’s visa that we had not found elsewhere.8
Our discovery of records pertaining to the government's consideration of Otto's visa case was especially difficult. Eva had retained in her files a copy of a letter with some intriguing information about the process involved in the U.S. government’s consideration of Otto's visa application. That letter, dated January 22, 1941, was from Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles to Eleanor Roosevelt’s secretary, Malvina Thompson. As explained in Chapter 21, it revealed that Otto’s case had been reviewed by an Inter-Departmental Committee composed of five different U.S. agencies. Referring to this letter in our initial FOIA requests, we sought records from each of the agencies comprising this committee. Initial responses to these requests advised us that no such records existed or that if they existed, they had either been destroyed or could not be located.

After several administrative appeals and thanks to the help of Mary Kay Schmidt of the National Archives, we finally received a copy of the minutes of the meeting in which the committee reviewed Otto’s case. Those minutes explained the committee’s suspicions about the credibility of Otto’s story of his capture and release by the Nazis and directed that Otto be interviewed again by the U.S. consul in Marseille.

As explained in Chapter 21, it is difficult to understand the delays of the American consul in Marseille in following the direction of Welles to conduct an “expedited” examination of Otto and report by telegram back to the State Department. Based on Otto’s correspondence to Eva, it is apparent that someone in Marseille was either negligently or intentionally delaying that process. We were eager to obtain any records about the further examination of our father by the U.S. consul in Marseille, the report of that examination to the State Department, and the further consideration of his case by the Inter-Departmental Committee.

Index cards were ultimately produced in response to our FOIA appeals that identified telegrams between the Marseille consul and the State Department that likely would have helped explain the reason for these delays. Those telegrams also would have identified the official (or officials) at the Marseille consul who interviewed Otto. To our disappointment, however, the telegrams themselves could not be located and apparently were destroyed by the State Department and/or the FBI. The National Archives informed us that the FBI had “thoroughly ‘weeded’ the files some years ago.”

Finally, our pursuit of administrative appeals under FOIA resulted in the release of the disturbing records described in Chapter 26 about
Eva’s application for an extension of her visa in 1943—in which the State Department’s representative urged the denial of her application based on the false accusation that she was a “rabid Communist”—as well as release of later records about the granting of her application for U.S. citizenship in 1946.

The identity of “Eva” in the René-Eva correspondence

After our discovery of the information about our father’s participation with René Bertholet in the effort to sabotage Nazi trains during the Drôle de Guerre, we continued to be intrigued with Bertholet and his work with our parents. In a book by Susan Subak, *Rescue & Flight: American Relief Workers Who Defied the Nazis*, we found a passage—and a key footnote—that led to our discovery about Eva’s work with Bertholet and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in New York during the war.10 Dr. Subak described Bertholet and referred to his contact in New York known as “Eva”:

[Daniel Bénédite’s]11 link with the New York office was the bold operative René Bertholet, OSS code number 328. Bertholet had been an acquaintance of Varian Fry, and upon his return to New York, Fry had relayed to U.S. Government contacts the idea that Bertholet could be a very useful source to them. . . . René Bertholet and his wife Hannah . . . concerned themselves with developing a large information network from their base in Bern with resistance and labor groups in France and elsewhere. In their large network, they had a particularly key friend in New York known as “Eva.” Eva was in touch with the OSS and may have been on the staff, but her or his identity was highly secret. . . . Allen Dulles considered René Bertholet’s information absolutely vital and was willing to use OSS codes to send letters and cables back and forth between “René” and “Eva.”12

Our suspicion that “Eva” might be our mother was heightened by Subak’s further speculation about her identity in a footnote:

“Eva” may have been German but certainly was comfortable in the French language and used it for correspondence. The person
. . . may have been Eva Wasserman, who worked for a time at the International Rescue and Relief Committee office in New York. . . It is also possible that Eva was Eva Levinski [sic], who worked with Toni Sender and Dyno Loewenstein in advising the labor division of the OSS.13

Subak based her speculation that “Eva” might be our mother on the memorandum that was jointly submitted by Toni Sender and others, including Eva Lewinski, to Allen Dulles on May 27, 1942 (the Sender Memorandum described in Chapter 25), and the source she cited for the existence of that memorandum was a book by Dr. Christof Mauch, The Shadow War against Hitler.14

Mauch’s book provided further important hints but no clear answers. Mauch furnished helpful background on the formation by the OSS in 1942 of the Labor Section, headed by Arthur Goldberg, and explained the nature of the Sender Memorandum.15 He noted that the goals of the Office of European Labor Research were described in the Sender Memorandum and cited the specific locations in the National Archives where the Sender Memorandum and related documents were located.16 Mauch also referred to “Agent 328,” who was providing critical secret intelligence information to the Allies at the end of 1944. He acknowledged that he did not know the identity of Agent 328 but guessed that it might be René Bertholet.17

A book written by historian Neal Petersen, From Hitler’s Doorstep: The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles, 1942–1945, contains many references to secret wartime correspondence between “328” and “Eva.” Petersen’s book is essentially a reproduction of actual messages based primarily on the operational records of the OSS (Record Group 226) at the National Archives that had recently been declassified. Messages in Petersen’s book referring to “Eva” and “328” shed some light on the extent and duration of this correspondence and the nature of the information exchanged. But Petersen never identified the “Eva” in this correspondence.

We contacted Dr. Mauch and advised him of our research into our parents’ early lives and our review of their papers. We asked if he might have retained the Sender Memorandum and other records from the OSS files that he had gathered in his research. While we were in southern France on our trip in 2011, we received an e-mail message from Dr. Mauch that contained both bad news and good news. The bad
news was that he no longer had copies of the extensive OSS documents he had obtained in his research for his book, and researching the OSS files would be “very, very difficult, almost impossible.” The good news was that Dr. Mauch confirmed from his recollection of the documents that our mother was the “Eva” in the OSS records and that she was corresponding regularly with René Bertholet. He explained in his e-mail:

I remember the name Eva Lewinski Pfister very well from many records. Usually only a code name was given or Eva Lewinski was just called Eva. And yes, there are telegrams and messages going back and forth to René Bertholet. I think Eva was a key figure in the whole network of Dulles’ more labor-oriented informants.

Dr. Mauch also made the following observations about our parents:

You absolutely have to keep the records of your parents. This is so important. . . . How sad I never got to know them—I did an OSS oral history project in the 1990s, and what a pity I could not keep the records. . . . At any rate: you can be very proud of your parents, very proud. They were among the best anti-Nazis. . . . They were good people. If only there had been more around like them.

So we now knew that Dr. Mauch believed that “Eva” was our mother and that “328” was Bertholet. But we still wanted to obtain OSS records from the National Archives that would confirm this. We contacted Susan Subak and explained our parents’ background and our recent discoveries regarding our mother’s involvement with the OSS—including the references we had found in her book, *Rescue & Flight*. Dr. Subak graciously agreed to review the OSS documents from her prior research files and undertake further research for us of the OSS records at the National Archives.

In a memorable e-mail message, Dr. Subak sent us a preliminary report on her research. She attached some key OSS documents she had found that referred to Eva Lewinski and stated: “I have no shadow of a doubt that ‘Eva’ is your mother.”

This research from the OSS files caused us to probe into the possibility of also finding previously classified records from the Special
Operations Executive (SOE) about Bertholet’s role in providing similar information to the SOE through ISK leader Willi Eichler in London. That led to our further discovery of a treasure of recently declassified files of the SOE.

In reviewing these SOE files on microfilm at the Cecil H. Green Library at Stanford University, we not only found many examples of what we have described as the Robert-Eclair correspondence in Chapter 25 but also discovered the crucial letter from Eva to Eichler in which she defended her involvement with the OSS by describing the genesis of that secret arrangement.

Further reflections about the ISK

The core belief of the ISK was that a good life could not be lived unless one is fully committed to helping others in greater need. That belief, based on reason and ethics, produced an organization of remarkable individuals—of Jewish and non-Jewish origin—who were willing to sacrifice their personal comfort and safety to engage in an early and active fight against the evil of Nazism. In that sense, the ISK is a remarkable example of German resistance and human goodness during a time when so many people and organizations turned their heads away from evil until it was too late for the millions who perished.

We have described the nature of our parents’ work with the ISK largely through their own writings. We had heard bits and pieces from them about the ISK. We knew that Eva had been involved with the group from a very young age and that Otto began working with the ISK after they met in Paris in 1935.

We also sensed that our mother had deeply ambivalent feelings toward the ISK and some of its most basic tenets, though she never discussed with us in detail the group or her disagreements with it—nor did we know enough to inquire. It seemed that issues surrounding the ISK had a powerful effect on our mother, but we were not sure how or why. In our quest for a better understanding of our parents and those times, we learned more about both the ISK and Eva’s relationship with it. In that process, we discovered the tensions between Eva and the ISK and found them to have been far more difficult than we had imagined.

Most important, we discovered the correspondence between our mother and Willi Eichler in the archives of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
in Bonn that revealed (after identifying the many pseudonyms) how Eichler had criticized Eva for her decision to marry Otto and how she defended that decision. We also discovered how Eichler sought to control Eva’s involvement with the OSS. The strain in her relationship with Eichler was part of a much deeper tension between our mother and some of the ISK’s principles and personal demands that she ultimately rejected.

We also learned that Eva was not the only devoted ISK member to be criticized for questioning the ISK’s leadership. For example, Paul Bonart and his wife Bertha were expelled from the ISK in 1938 after they criticized Eichler for failing to recognize the increasing dangers faced by ISK members who remained in Germany. Bonart, a German of non-Jewish heritage who was married to a member of the ISK, had remained in Germany after 1933 and participated in the ISK’s anti-Nazi work there. He was among those who were imprisoned by the Nazis and successfully resisted Nazi pressure to provide information about ISK members. As the danger from Hitler’s terror apparatus increased, Bonart and his wife were able to escape from Germany, first to Paris and ultimately to the United States. While in Paris in early 1938, Bonart and his wife tried to convince Eichler that the ISK’s resistance work in Germany had become futile and fatally dangerous to ISK members.18

According to Bonart, Eichler was deeply disappointed in the critical report that he and his wife presented at that time in Paris. Eichler found it unacceptable that they were giving up on the ISK’s basic strategy—which was to continue working with the network of ISK members in Germany to develop effective protests, resistance, and ultimate revolt by the Germans against Hitler. Bonart acknowledged that there “was no doubt in Bertha’s or my mind that Willi and his friends had dedicated their lives to the defeat of Hitler.” But Bonart questioned why Eichler was so critical of him and Bertha when they had never questioned Eichler’s personal integrity and commitment.19 Bonart described the pain felt by his wife, who had dedicated years of her young life to the ISK: “The rejection by her closest friends, the accusation of being disloyal, depressed her deeply. It took her more than a year to find a new direction and meaning for her life.”20 Yet, despite this negative personal experience with the ISK, Bonart retained the highest regard for the ISK:

In spite of its flaws, the ISK attracted hundreds of the most dedicated, ethically committed, and courageous human beings I have ever known. After the war, most of them returned
to Germany and joined the Social Democrats in the task of rebuilding the country. They held positions as elected representatives of Federal and State Governments, mayors, newspaper editors, writers and educators. It is safe to say that all of them were highly intelligent, honest, and committed public servants.21

Bonart was right about the contributions of ISK members after the war. To take a few examples, we previously described the work of Eva’s brother Erich as a judge and patron of the arts in postwar Germany. Willi Eichler returned from England to Germany in 1946 and he helped to rebuild the postwar Social Democratic Party (SPD). Eichler served as a member of the Bundestag from 1949 to 1953 and as a member of the SPD’s Executive Committee for over twenty years. He was one of the leading contributors to the development of the Godesberg Program, the SPD’s new platform that was ratified at an SPD convention in the town of Bad Godesberg (now part of the city of Bonn) in 1959.22 Eichler also continued his publishing work, founding the magazine Geist und Tät (Spirit and Action) and serving as its editor until his death in Bonn in 1971.

After the war, René Bertholet quietly devoted the rest of his life to helping those in need. He continued his relief work in Europe as people struggled to survive in the rubble of war. In 1949 he moved to Brazil, where for the next twenty years he worked with poor communities. He first participated in the creation of a colony of five hundred landless people in Paraná, Guarapuava, and then established a cooperative in Pindorama, Alagoas. Bertholet died in 1969 at the age of sixty-two.

In the fall of 1945, Minna Specht was the only German invited to attend an international conference in Zurich on the plight of children suffering in the wake of the war. In 1946 she returned to Germany, where she headed a private school until 1951. She also became a member of the German Commission for UNESCO and worked with the pedagogical institute of UNESCO in Hamburg. Together with Martha Friedländer, Specht also edited a pedagogical publication that offered alternatives to Nazi-era authoritarian approaches to the raising and education of children. Specht died in 1961.

Tom Lewinski, the son of Erich and Herta who had been separated from his parents throughout the war because of their total commitment to the ISK, was able to overcome that adversity and had a successful life with his family in England. But his separation from his parents was a
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poignant example of the personal cost of dedication to the ISK. In his brief tribute in the postscript to his book about his father, he wrote:

My father Erich Lewinski was an extraordinary man. If I have misjudged him, that is because I did not really know him, that is because at several crucial periods of our lives his priorities lay in other directions.

There are many who cannot see the wood for the trees. There are also those who see the wood very clearly, but fail to recognize the individual trees.

We know how Eva struggled with the consequences of her choice to engage in rescue and relief work in New York for others in dire need, consistent with her commitment to the principles of the ISK, rather than seeking a better-paying job that would allow her to assist her ailing mother in South Africa. As Eva was aware, that choice imposed a huge burden on her brother Ernst and sister Ruth, who struggled to make ends meet and sacrificed much to care for their mother. As a young woman in Germany, Eva did not like Ernst’s focus on material success. Such a focus seemed inconsistent with the ISK’s basic premise that a meaningful life required an active commitment to ease the suffering of the many in need. But Eva later came to appreciate deeply how people such as Ernst and Ruth, who did not devote their lives to an attempt to remedy injustice in the world, endured great personal sacrifices to help those in need who were closest to them.

Finally, we cannot ignore other unsettling aspects about the ISK’s political philosophy that stretch beyond the scope of this book. For example, the ISK’s view of the need to educate an elite group of political leaders—rigorously trained to make ethical decisions for others through reason and Socratic dialogue—is fundamentally inconsistent with a belief in the ability of all people, whatever their education and training, to make proper political decisions by exercising their right to vote. To ISK members in the 1930s, the electoral victories of Hitler’s Nazi Party confirmed their views of the dangers of democratic decision-making—but Hitler’s assumption of power was due to many other factors, including weak democratic institutions and traditions in Germany at that time that were unable to provide a check against Hitler’s assumption and abuse of power.
Despite the profound flaws of the ISK, we have not come across anyone—among our parents, other ISK members, other socialist groups at the time, and even individuals at high levels in the intelligence services of the United States and England—who was not impressed by the intelligence, ethics, idealism, trustworthiness, and profound courage of these ISK members. That is both high praise and high caution. Even the best of people and intentions can be blind to some truths and can cause pain. The ISK must ultimately be judged in the light of the group’s impact on the fight against Nazism and on the personal lives of its members—a subject that is worthy of further historical study and reflection.24

A palette of grays

There is much to be learned from all of this, and the lessons are not simple. Eva and Otto met at a time when the extremes on both sides of the political spectrum viewed complex human problems in simplistic and extreme terms, producing unparalleled human suffering. Their story reveals the complexities confronting those who seek to understand the truth and to live ethical and meaningful lives.

In addition to exposing complexities in evaluating the ISK, the story of Eva and Otto reveals the dramatically different faces of America at that time. America was a place of asylum and freedom for a small number of endangered refugees who, like Eva and Otto, were offered opportunities in America that were unheard of in Europe. But it was also a nation that shut its doors to the multitude of Jewish and non-Jewish political refugees who lost their lives in Nazi death camps. We see the selfless assistance of American citizens and groups, including Dorothy Hill, Paul Benjamin, the Jewish Labor Committee, the American Federation of Labor, and the Emergency Rescue Committee. We see how First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and government officials such as Eliot Coulter and Hiram Bingham used their power and influence to assist refugees despite an environment of understandable wartime fear. But the story also exposes U.S. government officials who did whatever they could to oppose and resist efforts to rescue endangered victims of Nazi persecution.

We also see the different faces of France during the war. On one hand, it was the country of refuge for those political opponents of Hitler who had to escape from Germany after 1933 and from Austria and
Czechoslovakia in 1938. It was the small village in southern France and the welcoming city of Montauban that provided shelter and safety for Eva and her small group after their release from Camp de Gurs. And it was the French resistance fighters throughout the war. On the other hand, France was also the country that interned Eva and other refugees in the Vel’ d’Hiv and Gurs and was complicit with the horrors of the Vichy government’s roundups and deportations of Jews to the Nazi death camps.

And we see the vastly different faces of Germany before and during the war. We know all too well the unmitigated evil of Hitler and of the many Germans who eagerly followed his descent into inhumanity. We also know that there were some Germans, Jewish and non-Jewish, who committed their lives to actively opposing Hitler and that they did so knowing that they faced the real risk of imprisonment or death after 1933. We will forever struggle in assessing the responsibility of those Germans who opposed Hitler but did not actively resist because they feared the consequences of such resistance for themselves and their families. And we cannot help considering the moral culpability of German children who grew up in the 1930s, such as our cousin Carl-Otto, and were conscripted as teenagers to fight for the Third Reich.

We must also grapple with unsettling questions about personal decisions and their consequences: What if Otto had not decided to leave Munich in 1920 to live in Rome? Hitler’s early political successes were in Munich. He appealed to a population that was struggling with the humiliation of its defeat in World War I and with the burden of reparations and economic hardship. As a poor young worker who was frustrated because he could not pursue his education and a better life, how would Otto have reacted to the rise of Nazism if he had stayed in Munich? Of course, we can never know the answer, because Otto’s move to Italy and then to France transformed him. It opened up his world.

Other personal decisions also had enormous consequences: Eva’s decision to join the ISK and her later wrenching decision to escape to America so she could rescue others, Eva and Otto’s decisions to have a child against the rules of the ISK, Otto’s decision to accept the request that he join the U.S. Army and return to Europe with the OSS, and Eva and Otto’s decision to remain in America after the war. To what extent were these decisions compelled by events beyond their control, and to what extent were they creating their own destinies?
Most important, however, we draw strength from seeing in the story of Eva and Otto a meaningful triumph of love, reason, and courage in an era of unprecedented hatred and brutality.

Examining the infinite hues of gray in seeking to understand the large and small riddles of life is a formidable challenge but also offers infinite beauty. In Otto’s February 12, 1941, letter to Eva, when he was still stranded in southern France and Eva was in New York, he included a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. That poem, translated from French, refers to the color gray:

Along the dusty path  
The green becomes almost gray.  
But this gray, only slightly,  
Has in it shades of silver and blue.  

Mindful of the humility exemplified by our parents’ entire lives, we submit that the story of Eva and Otto, when carefully examined, reveals unusual levels of meaning and beauty.