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How 50 children were rescued from the Nazis

'50 Children' by Steven Pressman tells the little known true story of an American couple's heroic rescue mission into the heart of Nazi Germany.

By [Marjorie Kehe](#)

Monitor books editor



'Neither Gil nor Eleanor Kraus themselves ever talked publicly ... about what they had done in the spring of 1939' says Steven Pressman about the Kraus's rescue of 50 Jewish children.

In the spring of 1939, well-regarded [Philadelphia](#) attorney Gilbert Kraus and his fashionable wife, Eleanor, were jolted out of their comfortable upper-middle-class existence by an urgent request to travel to Nazi-controlled Germany and [Austria](#) to rescue 50 Jewish children. Many would have walked away from this daunting challenge, but the Krauses did not. Journalist Steven Pressman tells their sobering and inspiring story in **50 Children: One Ordinary American Couple's Extraordinary Rescue Mission into the Heart of Nazi Germany**.

Pressman recently discussed the Krauses and their story with Monitor books editor Marjorie Kehe via e-mail.

Q: Why has this dramatic story not received more attention over the decades?

Neither Gil nor Eleanor Kraus themselves ever talked publicly (or, for that matter, even with their own family or friends) about what they had done in the spring of 1939. Once they had brought the 50 children into the [United States](#), they both put this episode behind them. After I began interviewing some of the rescued children (who are now well into their 80s), I realized that many of them did not know too many of the details of the rescue mission.

So for all these decades, there really wasn't anyone around who was able to tell the full story. Fortunately, my wife – who is one of Gil and Eleanor's four grandchildren – had kept a copy of her grandmother's private memoir, which is what allowed me to finally bring this story to light.

Q: How closely does your book track Eleanor's memoir?

Eleanor's memoir provided me with a fairly detailed blueprint for telling the story of the rescue mission. It certainly would have been difficult, if not impossible, to fully recount the Krauses' own actions without the memoir.

But the book also tells a much broader story about the political and social conditions that existed in the United

States during the 1930s, which form an essential backdrop against which the children's rescue mission took place. The book also focuses a great deal on the families and backgrounds of many of the rescued children, all of whom came from Vienna.

The private memoir definitely gave me the opportunity to tell much of the story in Eleanor's distinctive voice. But there are also so many other dimensions to this story that extend well beyond her own personal account.

Q: Why didn't more people follow the example of Gil and Eleanor?

Gil and Eleanor encountered enormous obstacles and challenges in their effort to rescue the children and bring them to safety in the United States. Not only did they have to deal with America's rigid immigration laws and opposition here at home, they also made the difficult decision, as Jews, to travel into Nazi Germany in order to choose the children and escort them back to America.

And this was a couple with two young children of their own back home in Philadelphia. From that perspective, I guess it's not too hard to understand why so few others might have even thought to do what the Krauses did.

Now, there were certainly other groups – the Quakers come to mind, for example – that tried very hard to help bring Jewish refugees into this country in the years following Hitler's rise to power. But everyone ran into the same obstacles. I think Gil was just determined to succeed when others had come up short.

Q: The Krauses were US citizens, but they were also Jews. Were they in danger in Nazi-controlled territory?

Gil and Eleanor definitely took some risks in traveling into Germany and Austria. The Nazis by this time had proven they were very capable of arresting or roughing up anyone they didn't like.

On the other hand, this was also a period when the Nazis were pressuring Jews to leave the Reich (though only after they'd been stripped of all their property, money and the rest of their possessions). So to that extent, the [Gestapo](#) and other Nazi officials, in a perverse way, were willing to let folks like Gil and Eleanor take the children away.

In fact, there's a very dramatic moment when Gil tells a Gestapo officer, "We have come to take fifty Jewish children with us to America." The Gestapo officer, who already knows that the Krauses themselves are American Jews, finally agrees to issue the passports allowing the children to leave Vienna.

Q: I was surprised to see, in the epilogue, that many of the children's parents eventually got out of Austria as well. Were they given preference because their children were already out?

The fact that the children were already in America did not guarantee visas for their parents. But it definitely helped, mostly because the parents (all of whom were already on waiting lists for visas) now only needed visas for themselves instead of their whole families.

So to that extent, the Krauses' actions absolutely made it easier for many of the parents to be reunited with their children.

Q: The Krauses rarely spoke of this later in life. Did they understand how heroic they had been?

It's so hard to speculate about what the Krauses themselves thought about this episode later on because they really and truly had put it all behind them. Gil focused on lots of other things in the years to come, including his role as the founder of a legal aid society in Doylestown, Pa., where he practiced law for a while.

But it's inconceivable to me that, in their private moments at least, Gil and Eleanor would not have fully grasped the true significance of their selfless actions. At least, that's what I would hope.