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Television

2 people spared the lives of dozens

Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus weren't saints, as their granddaughter says in the new HBO documentary airing on Monday, Holocaust Remembrance Day. But their individual and previously untold act of heroism saved the lives of 50 Jewish children in Austria on the eve of World War II.



HBO

The Krauses' story makes good watching.

Filmmaker Steven Pressman's "50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus" is the story of a well-to-do Philadelphia lawyer who saw what was happening in Europe at the end of the 1930s and took it upon himself to see what he could do to bring Jewish children to the United

States.

Narrated by Alan Alda, the film features actress Mami Gummer ("Emily Owens, M.D.") reading from Eleanor Kraus' unpublished memoir, which detailed some of the obstacles the Krauses had to overcome, both in the U.S. and in Berlin, to get the children out.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not prioritize opening the nation's doors and hearts to Jewish refugees at the time. In fact, he took no action in 1939 on the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which would have admitted an additional 20,000 Jewish refugee children above the quota limits. Then, as now, there was debate over the nation's immigration policies, and there were strict immigration quotas for Germany, which had annexed Austria in 1938.

But Kraus found that, for various reasons, immigration fell short of the quotas every year, meaning that there were about 50 unused visas available. With minimal cooperation from the U.S. State Department, he went to Austria to bring children out and was later joined by his wife.

At this point, the challenge for Jews living in the Third Reich wasn't getting out as much as it was finding a country that would admit them, says Henny Wenkart, one of the children whom the Krauses aided.

As difficult as it was

for families to send their children away, especially when their other children stayed behind, 50 families made the choice.

The 50 children were selected only after being found to be in good physical and mental health. One boy became ill just before the journey to the U.S. and was replaced. That boy died in a concentration camp in 1942.

The tearful parents had to stand with their arms at their sides, watching the train pull away.

On the day the children said goodbye to their parents and boarded the train that would take them away from Vienna, the parents were all told not to wave to the children. If they did, it might be mistaken for a Nazi salute, and Jews were prohibited from giving the Nazi salute. The tearful parents had to stand with their arms at their sides, watching the train pull away and grow small in the distance before disappearing altogether.

Although Pressman is a first-time filmmaker, "50 Children" is a beautifully crafted mix of archival photography, present-day interviews with several of the rescued children now living in the United States, and input from Holo-

caust historians such as Paul Shapiro, director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Also interviewed is Pressman's wife, Liz Perle, who gave her grandmother's unpublished memoir to her husband three years ago.

There is, by the way, a small coincidence in Mami Gummer's participation. As she reads Eleanor Kraus' eyewitness account of parents having to say goodbye to their children to save them, one can't help recalling the title character in the film version of William Styron's "Sophie's Choice," who also had to choose which of her children would be saved. Gummer's mother, Meryl Streep, won an Oscar for that role.

Although it has been more than 70 years since the children said goodbye to their families, the memories are clearly as sharp as if 1939 was yesterday, sharp enough to bring tears to one woman who never saw her mother again. We can only imagine what went through her mother's mind and heart that day at the train station, watching her daughter go out of her life forever.



50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs.

Kraus: 9 p.m. Monday on HBO.