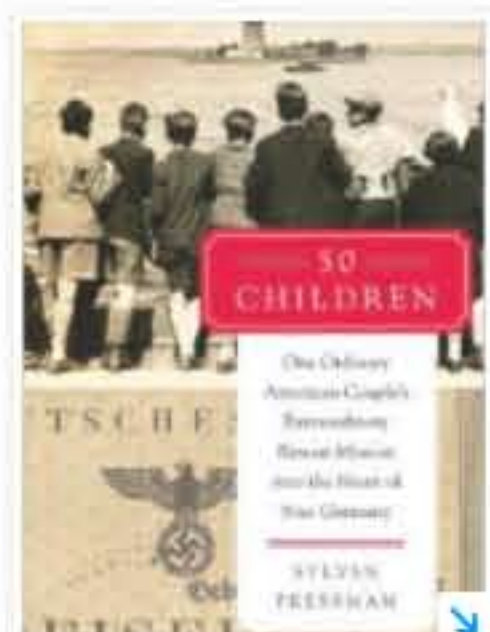


# '50 Children' remembers forgotten Holocaust rescue mission

Sam Adler, Bookish



(Photo: HarperCollins)

The Holocaust is easily one of the most-well documented events in history, with hundreds of books and films detailing not only the suffering of millions, but also the many attempts made to rescue captives, including [Kindertransport](#) and [Raoul Wallenberg's](#) efforts. A much less well-known story is that of Gil and Eleanor Kraus, a [Jewish-American](#) couple who entered [Nazi Germany](#) on the eve of war, rescued 50 Jewish children, and managed to bring them into America at a time where the U.S.'s immigration laws were at their strictest. [Steven](#)

[Pressman's](#) *50 Children* documents the Kraus' mission and sheds light on this forgotten tale of courage. We talked with Pressman about the Kraus's heroic efforts and what would happen if there were another Holocaust today.

**Bookish:** *50 Children* documents Gil and Eleanor Kraus' successful mission to rescue 50 Jewish children from Nazi Germany and bring them to the U.S. How did you come across their amazing story?

**Steven Pressman:** My wife, Liz Perle, is one of four grandchildren of Gil and Eleanor Kraus. Not long after Liz and I met, several years ago in [San Francisco](#), she showed me a document—it was basically a private memoir of sorts—that her grandmother had written decades earlier. The document spelled out, in considerable detail, a seemingly unbelievable story of how Gil and Eleanor had carried out the children's rescue mission in the spring of 1939. But it was all true, exactly as Eleanor had written. And that's when I knew I had to find some way to tell this great story.

**Bookish:** Given that war broke out just months after the Krauses arrived in Europe, what role did timing play in the success of their mission?

**SP:** The Krauses' mission took place during a period when the Nazis were allowing—indeed, pressuring—Jews to leave Germany and [Austria](#). They had a policy formally known as "judenrein"—getting rid of all the Jews. The greater challenge was finding other countries that would allow Jews in. But the door was closing pretty fast for Jews who by now were desperate to get out of places like [Vienna](#). Three months after the fifty children arrived in the United States, Hitler invaded [Poland](#) and borders quickly began to close. The Krauses' rescue mission would never have been possible at that point.

**Bookish:** Americans often forget that anti-Semitism was alive and well in the United States as well as Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Why do you think Americans remain blind to this fact?

**SP:** That's a tough question. The United States, of course, has a long history of incredible tolerance and acceptance when it comes to minority groups of all kinds. At the same time, there have been many periods throughout American history when public attitudes have been tremendously hostile and antagonistic toward minority religious, ethnic, and racial groups.

The irony, when it comes to Jews, is that—perhaps outside of Israel—there's probably no other country in the world where Jews enjoy freedom and acceptance more so than right here. But in the 1930s, it was a different picture, and anti-Semitism was rampant in this country. A lot of that, I think, came from simple ignorance about Jews—with a lot of people blindly accepting all the clichés about Jews controlling banks, money, international finance, etc. I suppose some of that still exists. But I don't think the situation today, when it comes to attitudes about Jews in this country, is anything at all like it was during the 1930s.

**Bookish:** Due in part to the [Great Depression](#) and the vivid memory of [World War I](#), the U.S. was extremely isolationist in the 1930s, which contributed to its reluctance to let in any Jewish refugees. Had the Holocaust occurred today, do you think things would be different?

**SP:** Hmm, that's another tough question! The United States has long had a rather schizophrenic attitude when it comes to all kinds of immigration matters. We always like to think of ourselves as a nation of immigrants, while idolizing the words on the Statue of Liberty about welcoming in the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." In reality, of course, we don't really quite put those words into practice, do we? If we did, we wouldn't have the ongoing debate over our immigration laws that continue to tie up folks in Congress. Another Holocaust? I'm afraid I'd have to say that the United States would probably still be pretty reluctant to throw open its doors to everyone who'd want to come here.

**Bookish:** In the book, you interview over a dozen of the children rescued during the Kraus' mission. Since publication, have you heard from or received any news of the ones you weren't able to contact?

**SP:** Yes, I have! I've sort of made it my mission at this point to eventually be able to account for all 50 of the children who were rescued by the Krauses. I'm now down to only about 10 for whom I've not been able to find any information. I'm hopeful that some of them, or their relatives, will also hear about the book and get in touch. My best guess is that half of the fifty children are still alive, 75 years after they first came to the United States.

**Bookish:** You also made a documentary on the Krauses' mission, which aired on HBO. What made you decide to write a book as well?

**SP:** I guess I did things in sort of an unusual order. Usually, a book comes first and then sometimes a film follows. In this case, I made the documentary film before writing the book. After I finished the film, I realized that I had gathered all this great research material, interviews, documents, photos, etc., about this story. I'm very proud of the documentary film, but there's so much of the research material that did not make it into the film.

I also knew that there was a much broader story to tell beyond the specifics of Gil and Eleanor's rescue mission. Writing the book allowed me to discuss in much greater detail the social and political conditions that existed in the United States at the time, all of which had a direct impact on whether or not the Krauses were going to succeed. And, of course, the book also allowed me to paint a much fuller portrait of Gil and Eleanor themselves. They are truly fascinating characters in their own right, and I was grateful to have the opportunity to give them their full due in the course of writing the book.

*Steven Pressman is an American journalist and author. In 2010, Pressman was involved in the production of a documentary film titled: 50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus, and served as writer, director, and producer. The documentary later served as the inspiration for 50 Children.*



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