

The Washington Post

express



Philadelphians Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus traveled to Austria in 1939 and brought 50 Jewish children back with them to America.

## Crazy, but It Worked

'50 Children' chronicles a couple's valiant effort to save Jewish youths from the Nazis in 1939

### Television

**HBO 9:00** Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus of Philadelphia lived a comfortable life. He was a lawyer. She was a homemaker with a taste for fine things. They had two kids, ages 9 and 13. In 1939, they knew European Jews were suffering under the Nazi regime — and that Jews could get out if they could find a place to go in a world of restrictive immigration

policies. Gilbert hatched a plan to travel to Austria and bring 50 children back, using U.S. visas that had been issued but weren't used. "This is really crazy," Eleanor told her husband. They did it anyway. Once home, the couple rarely talked about their feat.

When Steven Pressman heard the story from his wife, Liz — granddaughter of the Krauses — he felt "it read like something somebody would make up." Drawing from an unpublished manuscript by Eleanor, he wrote, directed and produced the documentary "50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus," premiering at 9 p.m. today on HBO.



Director Steven Pressman, right, discovered the Krauses' story via their granddaughter — his wife, Liz Perle, left.

**You open with a re-creation: a woman polishing her nails.**

One of the rescued children said very forthrightly, I had never seen

somebody with red fingernails before. It was a surprising way to open a documentary about saving Jewish kids from Nazi Germany. And it tells you something about Eleanor Kraus.

**Americans knew "the curtain was coming down on European Jews and chose to turn away."**

— STEVEN PRESSMAN, DIRECTOR OF THE HBO DOCUMENTARY "50 CHILDREN"

**But there are some things you can't tell us about her.**

She really is an enigma. I have a good sense of what was motivating Gilbert: saving Jewish lives and that contrarian streak. He did not like to be told he couldn't do something. Eleanor went along with him, but I don't think going into Nazi Germany would have been her first choice of things to do.

**There was opposition to the plan — from Jews.**

This was a period of rampant anti-Semitism in this country. [Opponents of the plan] were worried it would be perceived as trying to get around immigration laws and would stir up more of an anti-Semitic backlash.

**What insights did you gain into America of the 1930s?**

A lot of us cling to the notion that most Americans didn't know what was going on in Nazi Germany at this early stage. They say, "If only we knew." Guess what? People knew. I've got reams and reams of [newspaper] articles, starting in 1933. They knew the curtain was coming down on European Jews and chose to turn away. MARC SILVER (FOR EXPRESS)