

# Perseverance to the Rescue

## 50 Children

By Steven Pressman

Harper, 296 pages, \$26.99

BY MELANIE KIRKPATRICK

**IN THE SPRING** of 1939, a few months before the start of World War II, a young couple from Philadelphia, Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus, accomplished a heroic feat. They rescued 50 Jewish children from Nazi-held Vienna and escorted them to safety in the U.S. It was both an extraordinary humanitarian act and a classic tale of American initiative and perseverance. Almost everyone told the Krauses it couldn't be done—that the Nazis wouldn't let the children out and that the U.S. State Department wouldn't let them in.

Journalist Steven Pressman first told the story in a documentary that aired last year on HBO. In "50 Children," he provides a fuller treatment, blending historical research, interviews with the now-elderly men and women who were rescued and extensive quotations from an unpublished manuscript by Eleanor Kraus. The result is a rich and rewarding read.

Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus led comfortable upper-middle-class lives in Philadelphia. He was a successful attorney and she a socialite whose daily routine revolved around home, family, charitable work and cultural outings. When a fellow member of a national Jewish fraternal organization, Brith Sholom, asked Gilbert to spearhead an effort to rescue Jewish children in Germany, he agreed and enlisted his wife's assistance.

Their first task was to find sponsors willing to cover the children's expenses for as long as they were in the U.S. with-

out their parents. Eleanor persuaded friends to sign up and then helped them fill out reams of paperwork that required them to reveal intensely private information.

When an unsympathetic State Department official told her that the documents she submitted were "deficient" because they had been stamped by a notary rather than certified by an accountant, as a new rule required, she blew up: "Do you really believe I could not have found a CPA to approve these papers if I had known that you require such a signature?" Mr. Pressman comments that many American officials "went out of their way to thwart Jewish refugees' efforts to come to America."

Gil, meanwhile, pored over immigra-

## How a Philadelphia couple managed to transfer unused visas to Jewish children trapped in the Third Reich.

tion statistics looking for a way to obtain American visas for the children. The paltry visa quota for 1939 was already full, but Gil noticed that there were unused visas from earlier years. The visas had been issued to Germans (presumably Jews) who were unable to use them, possibly because they could not afford exit permits or could not unravel America's immigration bureaucracy. Gil then had the good fortune to meet two senior diplomats who were sympathetic to the plight of Jews in Europe and willing to interpret the rules to allow the unused visas to be transferred to 50 children.

Mr. Pressman paints a moving picture of the rescue from the children's point of

view, as the Krauses arrived in Vienna and set about interviewing parents and children. The boys and girls were nervous about leaving home but also excited about their American adventure. One boy, who was old enough to comprehend that he might never see his family again, begged the Krauses to let him bring his younger sister with him. She was almost out of diapers, he explained in his speech on her behalf. The boy was gently told: "We're not taking babies."

The Krauses were the maternal

ages of 5 and 14 who seemed to possess the physical and emotional stamina to withstand the long journey to America and the separation from their parents.

Eleanor, who herself was the mother of two, understood the maternal impulse to save her children, whatever the cost. "To take a child from its mother seemed to be the lowest thing a human being could do," she wrote. "Yet it was as if we had drawn up a lifeboat in a most turbulent sea. Each



**SAVIORS' SHIP** Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus (center) with the children they rescued on board the S.S. Harding as it sailed into New York harbor on June 3, 1939.

grandparents of Mr. Pressman's wife, who inherited Eleanor Kraus's unpublished memoir, the document that inspired Mr. Pressman to research this book. Eleanor's account of how she and Gil selected the children is heartbreaking: "All the children were charming," she wrote. "All the children were appealing. And all of the children stood in equal need of being rescued." The Krauses selected candidates between

parent seemed to say, 'Here, yes, freely, gladly, take my child to a safer shore.' " The mothers, she went on to say, were joyful that they were able to do something to protect their children.

Mr. Pressman spends considerable time exploring what he rightly calls the "profoundly hostile social and political environment" in the U.S. in which the Krauses' rescue project took place—the isolationism, anti-immigrant sentiment

and anti-Semitism. The Krauses went to Vienna during "a brief moment in time," he says, when the Nazis were "determined to rid the Third Reich of all Jews" and were allowing them to leave. "Tragically, the greater challenge was finding countries that would take them in." He notes that Britain found homes for 10,000 Jewish children in the now famous Kindertransport. The U.S. accepted only about 1,100, of which the Krauses' 50 constituted the largest single group.

Mr. Pressman was able to trace the fates of 37 of the rescued children. As of last summer, the rescued boys and girls had begotten a total of 58 children, 98 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. There is no more appropriate epigraph for "50 Children" than the quotation that Mr. Pressman selected from the Talmud: "Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he has saved the entire world."

As for the Jewish children who were left behind, the story of 5-year-old Heinrich Steinberger makes clear what happened to most of them. On the day before the Krauses were scheduled to depart Vienna with the 50 children, Heinrich fell ill and had to relinquish his place. The Krauses' interview notes describe him as a "nice boy, intelligent, healthy." His father worked at an insurance company before the Nazis removed him from his job. His mother was a housewife. In June 1942, three years after the departure of the Krauses and the 50 children, Heinrich was among 1,000 Viennese Jews, including the mother of a girl who had been rescued by the Krauses, who were murdered upon their arrival at the Sobibor death camp in Poland.

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