

HUMAN INTEREST



A safety drill aboard the SS President Harding, with Gil and Eleanor in the middle

Gil and Eleanor Kraus were a well-to-do American couple who risked everything to rescue 50 children from the Nazis

BY STEVEN PRESSMAN ADAPTED FROM 50 CHILDREN

The Ones They Saved

ON A CHILLY EVENING in early January 1939, Eleanor Kraus looked around her dining room and carefully inspected the gleaming china dishes, polished silverware, and sparkling crystal wineglasses that had been neatly laid out on the table. Her husband, Gil, had not yet come home from his law office in downtown Philadelphia, but Eleanor was already dressed for the evening. Their niece was bringing her fiancé to dinner, and Eleanor, as always, wanted everything to shine.

A few minutes later, Gil walked through the front door of the couple's spacious home, removing his overcoat and setting down his worn leather briefcase. "There is something I need to discuss with you," he said. Eleanor followed him upstairs and sat down beside him as he shaved and dressed for dinner.

She listened quietly as Gil began describing what sounded like a far-fetched idea. The newspapers had been filled with articles about the increasingly brutal conditions for Jews living under Adolf Hitler's regime. Less than two months earlier, in the horrific rampage known as *Kristallnacht*—the Night of Broken Glass—hundreds of synagogues in Germany and Austria had been desecrated and burned to the ground. Jewish-owned businesses had been looted and destroyed. Thousands of Jewish men had been summarily arrested and sent off to concentration camps.

Gil was determined to do something to help, even if it meant disrupting his

comfortable life and putting himself in danger.

Earlier that afternoon, he and his friend Louis Levine had begun hatching a plan: to rescue Jewish children trapped inside Nazi Germany. Both men were leaders of Brith Sholom, a national Jewish fraternal organization that had recently built a summer camp outside Philadelphia, including a large stone house with 25 bedrooms. Wouldn't it be wonderful, Gil said, if they could fill it with children—two to a room—who would otherwise face a terrifying future in Hitler's Germany.

As he finished dressing, Gil turned to his wife and told her he intended to go to Germany to carry out the mission. He asked her if she would accompany him. "No one in his right mind would go into Nazi Germany," Eleanor protested. "I'd be too scared to set foot in that country, assuming the storm troopers would even let us in." Her thoughts turned to her children, 13-year-old Steven and nine-year-old



During WWII, Gil Kraus closed his law practice and worked at the Philadelphia Record. Eleanor volunteered with the U.S. Army, helping to monitor for enemy air raids.

Ellen. She and Gil had never been away from them at the same time.

But Eleanor knew how stubborn her husband could be, so she was not surprised when Gil told her he had already made plans to go to Washington, DC, to propose the rescue to U.S. government officials, in particular George Messersmith, a former U.S. minister to Austria who was now serving as assistant secretary of state. Messersmith had worked at the American embassy in Berlin and was acutely aware of the mounting Nazi threat.

In the following days, Gil immersed himself in the United States'

rigid immigration policy. Despite the desperate situation facing Jews in Europe—and the fact that, at that point, Hitler was allowing them to leave—the United States imposed strict quotas on refugees. To make matters worse, throughout the 1930s, a number of State Department officials had done little to conceal their anti-Jewish attitudes. For instance, James Wilkinson, who worked in the visa division, once warned that easing the nation's immigration laws would create "a grave risk that Jews would flood the United States."

But Gil remained fixed on the plan

to rescue children. While reviewing immigration records, he discovered that approved visas sometimes went unclaimed. Would it be possible, he wondered, to set aside unused visas for Jewish children whose parents were already on waiting lists to come here?

Messersmith, always the diplomat, said it was an “intriguing” idea. Within days, Gil sent a letter to Messersmith, detailing his proposed mission and stating that there were “ample private funds to provide transportation of the children from Germany to Philadelphia and for their support, maintenance, and education.” Finally, Gil said that he and Eleanor were prepared to go to Germany themselves to select the children and escort them back to the United States.

By now, Eleanor shared her husband’s commitment. She threw herself into the job of obtaining affidavits from friends and others willing to guarantee support of the children, despite the awkwardness of asking them to reveal their bank balances. By early spring, she had completed 54 documents—four extra, just in case.

Right before the couple were to sail, however, a State Department aide warned Eleanor not to accompany her husband: War was imminent in Europe. Despondent over going on his own, Gil persuaded Dr. Robert Schless, a family friend who was their children’s pediatrician, to join him. “I shed a few tears very quietly,” Eleanor said later. “I prayed for their safe return.”

Several days after arriving in Europe, the men made their way to Vienna. A year earlier, in March 1938, Hitler had swallowed Austria into the Third Reich and immediately began a campaign to rid the country of its roughly 200,000 Jews. Jewish leaders in Vienna had been working feverishly to help families leave, and Gil had been advised by American embassy officials to select children for the rescue mission from that city, where conditions were deteriorating at an alarming pace.

Once he got to Vienna, Gil placed an urgent telephone call to Eleanor. In spite of the State Department warnings, he asked her to join him as soon as she could. “There is so much work to do here and very little time,” he told her. “I need you to come.”

Eleanor booked passage on the next ship to Europe.

When she arrived, Gil warned her that the secret police would monitor their every move. Their rooms would be searched daily. Signs proclaiming *Juden verboten*—“Jews forbidden”—greeted them wherever they went. Buildings were covered with swastikas, and images of Hitler hung in every shop window.

Hundreds of Austrian Jews were desperate enough to want to send their children away—without knowing if they would ever see them again. As word spread about the transport mission, families lined up outside a Jewish community center for a chance to meet with the Krauses. One child recalled



The children play at Brith Sholom's camp in the summer of '39. Hopes of bringing another 50 were dashed when war broke out that September.

years later, “I’ll never forget standing there in that line with my mother. There were all these other people there who threw stones and tomatoes at us and called us all kinds of names.” The children’s parents had already applied for visas to America, but the waiting list was daunting. More than 25,000 Jews from Vienna had applied in the last ten days of March alone.

Gil, who spoke a little German, interviewed parents who pleaded with him to take their children. Eleanor found it almost unbearable to imagine what was going through their minds. “To take a child from his mother seemed to be the lowest thing a human being could do,” she wrote later. “Yet it was

as if we had drawn up in a lifeboat in a most turbulent sea. Each parent seemed to say, ‘Here, yes, freely, gladly, take my child to a safer shore.’”

With each passing day, Eleanor’s heart grew heavier as she realized that most of the children would be left behind. She and Gil knew that any who were sick would likely be turned away by immigration officials. The children also had to be able to withstand the separation from their parents, so Dr. Schless, who was helping with screenings, advised against taking anyone under age five. Ultimately, the 50 painstakingly chosen children—the oldest of whom was 14—included seven sets of siblings.

One girl pleaded unsuccessfully for her baby sister, who was too young.

As Gil and Eleanor finalized their list, terrifying new problems arose. An officer at the American consulate in Vienna challenged Eleanor's affidavits; another told Gil that the visas might not come through for months.

With the fate of their mission hanging in the balance, Gil and Eleanor rushed to Berlin to speak with Raymond Geist, the senior American official at the embassy. He assured Eleanor that her affidavits were in perfect shape, but he couldn't guarantee any visas. That decision would have to wait until the children showed up at the embassy.

The couple returned to Vienna to gather the children, each of whom was allowed just one small suitcase. Before they could take their chances at the embassy, each child would need a passport from the Nazis. This led to a tense meeting with a Gestapo officer, who demanded to know why the Krauses had come to Vienna in the first place. "We have come to take 50 Jewish children to America," Gil replied forthrightly. Finally, after more intense questioning, the officer relented.

On the evening of May 21, 1939, the children and their parents waited quietly for hours on a dark platform at the Vienna train station. Storm troopers and attack dogs were everywhere. Eleanor was shocked to learn that the parents could not even wave goodbye to their children. Jews were not permitted to give the Nazi salute, and



Heinrich Steinberger was taken off the list of 50 children when he became ill before the group left Vienna. He died three years later at the Sobibor death camp.

any parents who so much as raised an arm could be arrested. "Their eyes were fixed on the faces of their children," Eleanor remembered later. "Their mouths were smiling. But their eyes were red and strained. No one waved. It was the most heartbreaking show of dignity and bravery I had ever witnessed."

The group arrived in Berlin the next morning, still without any assurance of visas. Eleanor could not imagine having to return any of the children to Vienna. Exhausted and homesick,

they entered the American embassy and waited to be interviewed. Finally, Gil sat down next to Eleanor with a look of immense relief. "There are 50 visas waiting for us," he whispered. "Our worries are over."

A day later, the Krauses, Dr. Schless, and all 50 children boarded the SS *President Harding* in Hamburg and sailed beyond Hitler's grasp. During the ten-day voyage, Gil and Dr. Schless gave daily English lessons.

After the ship arrived in New York City on June 3, the children spent the summer at the Brith Sholom camp. There they continued to learn English, wrote letters home, and concentrated on their new lives in America. Extra counselors, nurses, and staff took care of them. Gil spent countless hours writing to the families in Vienna and working on the children's future living arrangements. By Labor Day, all 50 had been sent to live with relatives or foster families, including two—Robert and Johanna Braun—who lived with the Krauses for two years.

Within a year of the rescue mission,

with help from Brith Sholom, almost a third of the Austrian parents got visas and were reunited with their children. Several more succeeded in coming to America during and after the war, but others perished in the Holocaust.

Gil Kraus died in 1975, and Eleanor in 1989. Roughly half of the children they rescued are still alive. Now in their 80s, most have lived full and productive lives as doctors, lawyers, writers, teachers, and business executives. Along the way, they also became husbands and wives, parents and grandparents—and, in some cases, great-grandparents.

In Europe, the Holocaust claimed the lives of 1.5 million children. Only about 1,000 "unaccompanied" children—those traveling without their parents—were allowed into the United States. The 50 saved by Gil and Eleanor comprised the largest single group. **R**

Steven Pressman's book *50 Children: One Ordinary American Couple's Extraordinary Rescue Mission into the Heart of Nazi Germany* (HarperCollins, 2014) is based on an HBO documentary that Pressman wrote, produced, and directed.

COMING SOON

BEST OF AMERICA

Brilliant, quirky, uplifting things that could happen only here

Punch Line Pioneers

You won't believe who really invented cat memes, emoticons, and stand-up comedy—or when they did it

"Get Me Out of Here!"

Real-life stories of people trapped in ice caves and under the sea

PLUS: A Day in the Life of Your Skin