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50 Jewish children, saved

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, let's honor those who perished, and those who rose above themselves to save others.

By Steven Pressman

IN THE SPRING OF 1939, on the eve of the Holocaust, Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus set out on a highly unlikely mission. The handsome lawyer and his stylish wife left their two young children and their comfortable home near Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and made their way into Nazi-controlled Austria. Their goal: to rescue 50 Jewish children from Vienna and bring them to safety in the United States.

The fact that the Krauses were Jewish added to the daunting challenges and long odds that stood in their way. Yet another obstacle was American attitudes and policies during the 1930s that all but shut the door to Jews trapped by the Third Reich.

America's immigration laws included stringent quotas that sharply curtailed the number of foreigners allowed into the country. The State Department was filled with high-ranking officials who were openly anti-Semitic. Congress was in no mood to expand the quotas, particularly since public opinion polls found overwhelming support for severe restrictions on immigration. And although President Franklin D. Roosevelt may have harbored slightly more sympathetic views toward Jewish refugees, he had other important political objectives to achieve in the pivotal months leading up to the outbreak of war in Europe. Saving Jews, unfortunately, was not on his priority list.

Surprisingly, the Krauses — who also happened to be my wife's late grandparents — faced stiff resistance from Jewish community leaders and organizations. Much of it was rooted in the fear that any attempts to bring Jews into the country would only fan the flames of the anti-Semitism that was so prevalent in America at the time. In fact, when two Jewish congressmen from New York — Emanuel Celler and Samuel Dickstein — suggested a bill to admit victims of Hitler's religious and political persecution, national Jewish groups quickly denounced the proposal. "As heartless as it may seem," the American Jewish Committee announced, "future efforts should be directed toward sending Jewish refugees to other countries instead of bringing them here."

The Krauses remained undeterred. Gil found a sympathetic ear in George Messersmith, a former U.S. ambassador to Austria, who in early 1939 was assistant secretary of State. Messersmith was no champion of broad-scale Jewish rescue efforts, but he looked favorably on Gil's resourceful plan to set aside a small number of unused immigration visas for children rather than let the precious visas simply expire.

In saving a group of children they didn't know, the Krauses offered a glimmer of hope to parents who were only too willing to send their children across an ocean with strangers, without knowing if they would ever see them again.

"To take a child from its mother seemed to be the lowest thing a human being could do," Eleanor Kraus later wrote in a private account of the rescue mission. "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.'"

Happily, a majority of the children saved by the Krauses were ultimately reunited with their parents, who found it easier to obtain visas after their children were already here. A few, however, never again saw their mothers or fathers after saying goodbye at a Vienna train station in May 1939.

I've interviewed several of the children (now in their 80s) rescued by the Krauses. "What people don't understand is that in the beginning, everyone could get out. But nobody would let us in," remembered Henny Wenkart, who left behind her parents and infant sister. "Everyone could've been saved. Everyone."

Wenkart was later reunited with her family in the United States. The Krauses had made sure that all of the children found homes with relatives or temporary foster families after their arrival in America.

In the aftermath of the Kristallnacht pogrom that raged across Nazi Germany in November 1938, Britain allowed in 10,000 children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, a government-endorsed rescue effort that came to be known as the Kindertransport. In the United States, only 1,000 or so unaccompanied children — sent off by their parents — gained admission throughout the entirety of the Holocaust. Hitler's relentless pursuit of the Final Solution resulted in the deaths of 1.5 million children. The 50 children saved by Gil and Eleanor Kraus amounted to a mere drop in the ocean.

And yet each life saved also carries with it a powerful message about the ability of ordinary people to do extraordinary things. "He who saves a life, it is as if he has saved the entire world," declares the Talmud, the ancient collection of rabbinic teachings that, along with the Torah, provides the underpinnings of all aspects of Jewish living.

The Krauses, who were secular Jews, in many respects were hardly the stuff of heroes. But their deeds were heroic, and the remarkable fact that they rarely talked about this episode during the rest of their lives underscores the significance of their Talmudic actions 75 years ago.

This year's Holocaust Remembrance Day begins at sundown Sunday. It is a day to honor the memory of those millions of men, women and children — Jews and others — who perished in the gas chambers and ovens, the ghettos and the killing fields, and whose deaths will be forever mourned. But it should also be a day to embrace the miracle of life, and to honor those brave souls who rose above themselves to save others.

STEVEN PRESSMAN is the author of "50 Children: One Ordinary American Couple's Extraordinary Rescue Mission into the Heart of Nazi Germany," and the director and producer of an HBO documentary about the Krauses.