

A rescue revealed

Tale of the '50 children' to debut this Holocaust Remembrance Day on HBO



By Peter Rothholz
Jewish News Service

Journalist Steven Pressman first learned of the 50 children rescued by Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus in 2002 from his wife Liz Perle, the Krauses' granddaughter, who had possession of a formerly hidden and unpublished manuscript that Eleanor had written decades earlier.

That manuscript spelled out in detail the Krauses' mission to rescue Jewish children

shortly before the outbreak of World War II and launched Pressman on an extensive quest for more information that took him to Europe and to archives in Jerusalem and Washington, DC.

A first-time filmmaker, Pressman started collecting footage in 2010 and is now set to reveal the Krauses's story in his documentary, *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus*, which will debut on HBO on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

When the United States Line ship the *President Harding* arrived in New York from Hamburg on June 3, 1939, among her passengers was a group of 50 unaccompanied Jewish children from Vienna, rescued from Hitler's persecution by the Krauses, a remarkable couple from Philadelphia.

News of pogroms against the Jews of Germany and Austria became ever more alarming after Kristallnacht, on November 9, 1938, and Gilbert Kraus felt it was necessary to do whatever he could to help bring them to safety. But American immigration laws at the time were highly restrictive, and quota limitations meant that waiting times for a US visa were up to five years. While the American Jewish community did make tepid efforts to ease these restrictions, they were not successful. Anti-Semitism was rampant in the US at the time, and many Americans – including Jews – did not want the immigration laws to be eased.

Kraus (then 42 years old and a successful lawyer) and his wife were unwilling to stand idly by. Armed by the example of Britain, which admitted 10,000 Jewish children, they hoped to work within existing US immigration laws to improve the situation. To strengthen their position, the Krauses first secured the support of the members of B'rith Shalom, a Philadelphia Jewish fraternal organization to which their family belonged, and obtained assurances of affidavits of support for a modest group of just 50 children.

Kraus was eventually referred by the US State Department to the American Embassy in Berlin, where he made a personal appeal. In spite of the obvious risks faced by a Jew traveling to Nazi Germany, he left for Berlin in the spring of 1939 to meet with the Jewish leadership there and to plead with the American chargé d'affaires, Raymond Geist. Using his legal skills, Kraus argued that some US visas already issued had not actually been used; some recipients had gone elsewhere

while others had died or were unable to travel. This line of reasoning convinced Geist, who agreed to re-issue 50 of the unused visas in favor of the “Kraus children.”

Advised by the Jewish leadership in Berlin that the need was greater in Austria, Kraus immediately left for Vienna. He sent for his wife (who had to leave their two children, ages nine and 13, behind) and also asked his friend, Dr. Robert Schless, a Philadelphia pediatrician, to join him there. In Vienna, the Jewish community invited Jewish parents to bring their children to be selected for possible immigration to America.

Schless then examined each of the children assembled and selected the top 50 that he felt were both physically healthy and emotionally stable enough to withstand the journey and as the stress of separation from their parents and their homes.

NARRATED BY Alan Alda and with actress Mamie Gummer as the voice of Eleanor Kraus, Steven Pressman’s gripping film weaves together never-beforeseen archival footage as well as photographs and keepsakes of the rescued children, nine of whom share some of their experiences in the film.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the rescue is the quick and seemingly easy adjustment the children made to their new home. All of them spent several weeks in a guest house on the property of Camp B’rith Shalom in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, after which – according to Henny Wenkart, one of the 50 children – most were reunited with their parents or other family members and “scattered.”

Now 84 and a Harvard PhD, Wenkart recalls a night when she and her friends watched the young male and female counselors in the neighboring recreation hall “throwing one another around.” The children were not surprised – “after all, we were told America is a violent country,” Wenkart says.

It was only later that they learned the counselors were jitterbugging. Similarly, Erwin Tepper, then seven and now a retired radiologist, remembers being served a dessert of sliced bananas and jello. Never having seen or tasted jello, he was convinced it was a preservative that had to be scraped off the bananas before eating.

50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus was written, directed and produced by Steven Pressman and edited by Ken Schneider. Directors of photography are David Sperling and Andrew Black and the original musical score is by Marco D’Ambrosio. It will air on Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 8, on HBO, and is presented in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum