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## 50 Small Victories in a Time of Unbearable Loss

True stories of people who helped likely victims escape an onrushing genocide never grow old, partly because they all have at their core soul-searching ques-

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tions that will always be current. How can we respond to similar horrors today? Would we personally have risen to the occasion the way a few did as the Nazi nightmare was enveloping Europe or murderous extremism was sweeping Rwanda?

The documentary “50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus,” Monday night on HBO, may have the same template as other tales of impossible odds and outsize courage, but it’s still heart-wrenching, thrilling and above all relevant. The film, by Steven Pressman, is about a Philadelphia couple, Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus, who got it in their heads that they should try to bring 50 Jewish children out of Nazi-occupied Austria in 1939.

They faced daunting obstacles, not the least of which was that

they were Jewish and that the mission required them to travel to Berlin and then Vienna. But — a dismaying thing to recall today — they were also hampered by an American bureaucracy that was not exactly taking the lead in humanitarian efforts.

“When Jews looked around the world and they saw Hitler and they saw Stalin and they saw Mussolini, they felt mighty glad that the man who was running the United States was Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” says Jonathan D. Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University. “Nevertheless he was a consummate politician. And there were things that he felt deeply about, and he made sure they happened. Arming America secretly was one of them. Helping Britain was one of them. Saving Jews was not one of them.”

Anti-Semitism was also strong in the United States, the film points out. Even some Jews tried to dissuade the Krauses for fear of riling up this sentiment.

Alan Alda provides the film’s narration, and the Krauses’ story

is told partly through Eleanor Kraus’s journals, which are lovingly read by Mamie Gummer and sometimes approach poetry.

“To take a child from its mother seemed to be the lowest thing a human being could do,” one journal entry went, describing the moment when the Krauses met with parents in Austria. “Yet it was as if we had drawn up in a lifeboat in a most turbulent sea. Every parent we met seemed to say: ‘Here. Yes. Freely. Gladly. Take my child to a safer shore.’”

What really makes the film hit the heart, though, are interviews with 9 of the 50, now in their 70s and 80s, testifying to lives fully lived that would probably have been cut short if not for the Krauses. One of them, Henny Wenkart, speaks to the seldom noted other part of the escape-from-tyranny equation, the need for safe havens.

“What people don’t understand is that at the beginning, you could get out,” she says. “Everybody could get out. Nobody would let us *in*. Everyone could have been saved. Everyone.”