

## Conversation with Filmmaker Steven Pressman

By Cindy Mindell

In 1939, a well-to-do, young Jewish couple from Philadelphia engineered the rescue of 50 Jewish children from Nazi-occupied Vienna, the largest such operation during the Holocaust. Once back home, Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus picked up their lives and rarely talked about the experience.

Seventy years later, their story was told by first-time San Francisco-based filmmaker Steven Pressman, who is married to the Krauses' granddaughter. Narrated by Alan Alda and Mamie Gummer, the documentary weaves together excerpts from Eleanor's journals, archival footage, and rare photographs of the children. Much of this bittersweet tale is told by nine of the surviving children, now in their 80s.

"50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus" debuted on HBO. It will be screened in Connecticut at the Mandell JCC Hartford Jewish Film Festival on Tuesday, March 25 at 7 p.m.

Filmmaker Steven Pressman spoke with the Ledger about how he turned a bag of old documents into a riveting documentary.

### Q: How did you first learn of this rescue mission?

**A:** My wife, Liz Perle, is one of the Krauses' grandchildren and always knew what they had done, though not in detail. Growing up in Rowayton, she knew vaguely that they had done this thing and also had a copy of a memoir. It's hard to describe it exactly: some years after this episode, Eleanor Kraus had written an account of what she and Gil had done. It was a personal memoir, never published, and Liz had kept this document for many years. When we first met in San Francisco in 2000, she showed it to me one day.

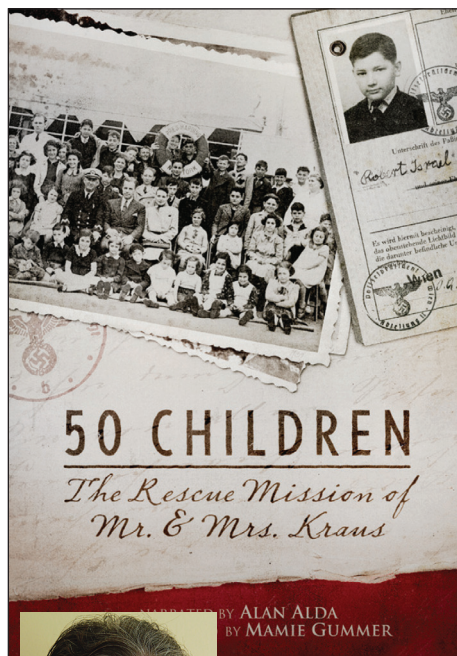
I read this thing – 170 typed pages that spelled out this incredible story – and I said, "What is this? Is this fiction? I've never heard of such a thing." We got married in 2001.

I was working as a print journalist and Liz spent many years in book publishing and over the years, from time to time, we would talk about doing something at some point with this incredible story – maybe a book or a magazine article. But we were raising a couple of kids, we were both busy, and we never got around to it.

In early 2010, I finally decided that maybe the best medium would be a documentary film, something completely different from anything I had ever done. I talked it over with Liz and she supported the idea and the project took off from there. It took me roughly two years to make the film. I was looking for some new things to do and thought it would be a personal and professional challenge.

### Q: Besides telling the rescue story, what else did you hope to explore in the film?

**A:** I made a conscious decision to look for footage that was different from the kind of footage we're used to seeing in films set during the Holocaust. This story takes place in spring 1939, before the war has started in Europe, and a unique period during the



Steven Pressman

Nazi era when Jews were still allowed to leave and were being pressured to leave. It was well before the death camps; there are concentration camps already but no gas chambers or ovens yet.

I was interested in highlighting the images of places like Vienna and Berlin that people would have been seeing at that time. That also allowed me to make a film that is based on the looming Holocaust, but free of those images that we're so accustomed to seeing in Holocaust stories. This is a different period and there was still risk and danger for two American Jews to go there.

I also really wanted to underscore what was happening in this country. I was personally shocked to learn just how antisemitic this country was – public opinion polls, attitudes in Congress, attitudes regarding immigration.

I talk about the film at screenings, along with Paul Shapiro, director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. When he speaks, he loves to talk about this enduring myth that Jews in this country did not know what was going on in Nazi Germany. But all you have to do is look at the Krauses and you realize that people did know what was going on long before Auschwitz and the gas chambers. Gilbert and Eleanor Kraus were not spies, they did not have access to government reports, they were reading the newspapers just like everybody else and knew what was going on. The difference was that they chose to do something – they were "just plain decent people," as one of the [adult] children says in the film.

### Q: The film shows and references many types of documents. How did the Krauses and you get access to them?

**A:** When I asked the rescued children how their parents had learned about the rescue mission, a few mentioned a newspaper

announcement in a Viennese Jewish newspaper. There are still archives of Jewish newspapers published in Vienna at that time, and I tried in vain for many months to find any existing printed proof. People I talked to in the Jewish community in Vienna said it was highly likely that a Jewish newspaper would have printed an announcement; the Krauses' visit was known about well in advance in the Viennese Jewish community.

Eichmann comes to Vienna in May 1938 to set up the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna. He confiscates the files of those Jews wanting to leave Vienna and the Jewish community organization does all the processing and paperwork and is keeping in touch with the families. When Gil arrives, an office is set up for him in the Jewish community organization building and he uses the files to find the families willing to send their children with the Krauses.

Liz also ended up with a plastic bag filled with a dozen of the children's original German passports and U.S. immigration cards. My speculation is that, when the children arrived in the States with Gil and Eleanor, they had their German passports to leave Germany and Gil collected all the passports for safekeeping. But once the children got here, they weren't going to need them, so Gil ended up with a bunch of them. Some of the children kept their passports, and sent them to me for the film project.

The passports were stunning: they were from Nazi Germany with the swastika stamped on them. During the course of making the film, Liz ended up donating them to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The photos from the kids used in the film came from the kids themselves: their parents or other relatives who escaped were able to hold onto and preserve family photos. They were all really generous in making them available to me.

### Q: What did the children – now elderly – remember about the Krauses?

**A:** Once I told them that I was making the film and that my wife was a granddaughter of the Krauses, I was able to fill in many details about the Krauses and what they had to go through to rescue the children. It was personally gratifying to be able to fill in a lot of gaps for these "kids," and they were able to fully understand the story for the first time. In some cases, they had never talked publicly about the experience. I feel grateful to have given the opportunity to tell the story from their perspective as kids at the time.

One of the rescued children, Robert Braun, lives in Fairfield. He and his late sister were the only two of the 50 children who were taken home with the Krauses for two years. And, among the children, they were the only two who stayed in touch with the Kraus family. I did run across occasional letters: one of the boys had a bar mitzvah and sent a lovely letter to "Uncle Gil," letting him know. But that was really not characteristic. For the most part, these were children who, once they were here or reunited with parents or living with relatives, were interested in resuming their lives as normally as possible and living their own lives, and the Krauses did the same.

**50 CHILDREN**  
THE RESCUE MISSION OF MR. AND MRS. KRAUS  
Tuesday, March 25 • 7:00 PM  
Herbert Gilman Theater, Mandell JCC

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