

50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. & Mrs. Kraus

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As its subtitle indicates, "50 Children" was an intensely personal rescue mission conceived by Gilbert Kraus, a Philadelphia attorney, and his wife, Eleanor, an ardent partner in his cause, which was to save the lives of Jewish children facing annihilation. Gilbert decided, in 1939, that the site of his action should be Austria, whose citizens had welcomed the German army with wild enthusiasm and who had, indeed, joined in the orgy of beatings and killings during the Kristallnacht riots against Jews, with more appetite for brutality than had been seen in Germany.

The film—narrated by Alan Alda, with Mamie Gummer reading from Mrs. Kraus's memoir—reveals a couple admirably modest about themselves, heedless of the danger they faced as Jews going to Nazi-occupied Vienna, and utterly intransigent in their will to bring 50 children out to safety. The film can be faulted for its simple-minded view of Franklin Roosevelt as responsible for the failure to pass a bill that would have permitted thousands of Jewish children to enter the U.S. FDR can be faulted for putting up no fight for the bill in his effort to keep the isolationists under control—but it was the U.S. Congress, bitterly and openly determined to bar any such immigration, that killed all hope for the measure. The film is, to its credit, entirely frank about the hostility to the Krauses' project on the part of American Jews worried about the trouble it might cause them. All this Mr. and Mrs. Kraus ignored as they went forward to their task, intimately and memorably detailed here.