

Orlando Sentinel

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THEATRE



Guest speaker shares her mother's Holocaust experience

By **CAITLIN HAWES**
The Breeze

Hidden in a small cardboard box are old, yellow letters, stained and covered with faded blue ink. Most are written in German, which the Nazis required so they could censor the letters between labor camps. Some also contain Polish, Yiddish, Czech or Hebrew. They include postcards and birthday cards.

After seeing Sala Garnarcz's letters, her daughter Ann Kirschner quickly began pressing her for more information, researching documents and interviewing characters, survivors and historians. After more than 40 years of pained silence and

fearing she would not live long, Sala revealed her secret.

Tuesday evening at Latimer-Shaeffer Theatre, Kirschner spoke about the resistance and heroism of her mother and her mother's friend, Ala, during the Nazi persecution of the Jews — a story revealed by these old letters and photos.

"Is anyone going to come?" Kirschner's mother asked her on the telephone right before her daughter's presentation. Sala still has difficulty revealing her story publicly, saying she feels as though she is "walking around naked." She refused to answer questions for years until she finally unveiled the box, which Kirschner refers as to

"Pandora's box" and "a pebble in water."

Sala's letters are now part of the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library. Telling the story of her mother's enslavement in seven Nazi work camps, Kirschner's book, "Sala's Gift" is the basis for the play presented in the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts this week.

The story began in 1940 in Sala's home in Sosnowiec, Poland, with a letter to Sala's sister, Raizel. Raizel was told to report to a train to go to a labor camp and work on the construction of a German autobahn, or highway. With an "altruism

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Mainstage play 'Letters to Sala' brings daughter's words on stage

By **TORIE FOSTER**
The Breeze

Arlene Hutton's "Letters to Sala" may be written in the context of the Holocaust, but it is not really about the Holocaust.

Based on the book "Sala's Gift" by Ann Kirschner, the play "Letters

to Sala" spotlights 16-year-old Sala Garnarcz (played by sophomore theatre major Amanda Kohr) and her survival in a Nazi labor camp. To remain hopeful, she writes to friends and family and secretly saves the hundreds of documents she obtains.

Fifty years later, Sala shares them

with her daughter, Ann (junior theatre major Kellie Ferrick).

In the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts, the right side of the stage holds a simple kitchen scene set in a '90s New York apartment; on the left, an even simpler set of

see **PLAY**, page 10



JACOS MELTON / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Ann Kirschner, the daughter of Sala Garnarcz and author of "Sala's Gift," visited JMU on Tuesday to talk about her mother's experience.

SALA

Continued from Page B1

Born Sala Garncarz, she was the youngest of 11 children in a poor Jewish family in Sosnowiec, Poland, near the German border. In October 1940, she was 16 when her older sister Raizel was ordered to report to the Nazi labor camp Geppersdorf.

Unlike such extermination camps as Auschwitz, the Nazi labor camps were designed to support the war effort. Geppersdorf was part of a 177-camp network that forced Polish Jews to work in the construction, munitions and textile industries.

Fearing for her frail sister's health, Sala volunteered to take her place. The six-week stint she was originally summoned for turned into nearly five years spent at seven camps.

Because she could sew, Sala escaped backbreaking labor and worked as a seamstress.

'I had no idea'

Ann Kirschner knew nothing of her mother's ordeal until she saw the letters, carefully saved for five decades. For propaganda reasons, mail was allowed at labor camps until 1943 although it had to be written in German and was first read by Nazi censors.

Preparing for heart surgery, Sala Kirschner at last wanted to make sure her daughter knew the truth.

"I was certainly aware growing up that my mom wasn't like all the other moms: She spoke with an accent," Ann Kirschner

Life lesson

Rollins actress says Sala's story of life in a Nazi camp profoundly moved her.
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said. "I knew her family was all dead, but I had absolutely no idea about this."

She set out to learn all she could.

But she also had to understand why the past had been kept quiet.

Her parents were afraid of frightening their children with the story, Ann Kirschner said, so it remained buried. Her father, Sidney, was complicit in the secret. An American soldier, he had met Sala in Europe during the chaos after the war.

"They met in September; they were engaged in January, married in March, and she was on a boat to the U.S. in May," Ann Kirschner said.

Now 86 and 88, respectively, Sala and Sidney Kirschner live in New York.

Pieces of history

As Ann Kirschner researched the letters, she uncovered items of historical significance.

Among her mother's friends at one of the camps was Ala Gertner, who led a revolt at the Auschwitz concentration camp. She was hanged there by the Nazis. Sala had about 80 letters from Gertner.

Recently, a distant relative of Gertner's contacted Ann Kirschner after learning of her book.

"So here it is, 20 years

later and the effects keep coming," said Ann Kirschner, who is dean of Macaulay Honors College in New York.

The effects on Kirschner's family weren't all positive. Ann Kirschner felt torn: "I was part loving daughter and part oral historian."

Ann Kirschner's college-age daughters surprised her by not wanting to make the letters public.

"My daughters felt very protective of my mother," she said. "I was not sympathetic, and I did not handle it well."

Sala Kirschner was still struggling with revealing her past to the world.

"She's a very private person," her daughter said. "For her, sometimes, it's very difficult. She says if she had known what I was going to do, she would not have given me the letters."

The family eventually agreed to donate the letters and establish the Sala Garncarz Kirschner Collection of the Dorot Jewish Division at the New York Public Library.

"It was a very painful time for all of us, deciding what's best for the living and what's owed the dead," Ann Kirschner said. "Thankfully, it was all resolved in a very positive way."

When her mother's doubts resurface, Kirschner said, she simply reminds her: "How else will people remember if we don't give them stories? If we don't tell them, who will?"

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PLAY | Stresses friendship

from front

table and chairs sit in World War II-ridden Poland. Theatre professor Roger Hall back and forth scenes between the eras, and the literal shifting between the past and the present creates a blending of the two, suggesting that perhaps the two aren't really that separate at all.

Almost immediately, the tension between present and past surfaces as Ann obsessively researches their background and constantly questioning her mother. This is also seen with the relationship among Ann and her daughters, Caroline and Elizabeth (junior theatre majors Arielle Kook and Lindsay Wirt), as all three argue over whether to keep the letters or give them to a library.

Letters permeate the entire show: letters to and from friends and family. "Write to me!" is the frequent, urgent request Sala receives. The importance of connection stands out. Without it, everything is lost, Sala's friend Ala (senior theatre major Noel Edwards) reasons.

And it is this form of communication that allows Sala to survive; it is her sole source of hope and encouragement in her prison-like state. Though she admits she usually has ample food, housing and friends, Sala faces constant limitation. It is through her letters, the only expression of individuality she has, that she nears any form of freedom.

Sala's epistolary crutch reflects Ala's assertion that "love is the most beautiful light in the world." Indeed, Sala is only able to persevere because of her reliance on her family (particularly her sister Raizel, played by junior theatre major Rebecca Dowdy); her friends, especially Ala;

and her romances (including the only animated character, Harry Haubensstock, played by senior theatre major Andrew Darnell).

"Letters to Sala" had an almost unbearably silent atmosphere throughout the show, minus a few scenes. It has a haunting presence that highlighted the results of a human disconnection. This was eerily illuminated by characters enacting the sending of letters by actually handing the letters to Sala themselves — underlining the devastation of this unnecessary separation.

At one point in the show, Raizel writes to her sister that she will not bother writing down the occurrences of her life in a camp, as her words would not aptly describe the reality. This well-represents the performance of "Letters to Sala," which approaches the huge undertaking of telling Sala's story.

While some scenes came across as forced and occasionally flat, they also highlighted the difficulty of recreating this historic event as well as the repercussions and the emotions that went along with it. For this reason, the performance deserves significant respect.

But as an older Sala reminds us, "The present is what matters." "Letters to Sala" simply acts as a timeless supplication: Connect with those around you, and be grateful for what you have.

"Letters to Sala" runs at 8 p.m. until Saturday and tickets are \$11 to \$14. An exhibit titled "Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps" is also set up in the Forbes Center lobby until the end of November.

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SPEAKER | Granddaughters oppose sharing Holocaust letters with public

from front

blended with a sense of adventure," the 16-year-old Sala offered to go in place of her bookish, weaker sister. The family reluctantly agreed.

At the train station, Sala's mother's sobs attracted Ala's attention, who promised to take care of the girl. So began a friendship that continued until Ala's death.

Jordan Conway, a junior history major and the dramaturge for the play based on Sala's book, had read the book

and said that Kirschner's presentation was exactly like it, but the extra detail about Ala's story was "incredible."

"My mother and her friend Ala took very different paths toward resistance and heroism," Kirschner said.

Sala showed her heroism by preserving the letters from camp to camp, despite the risk of punishment — keeping letters was utterly forbidden. Ala took part of an escape plot at Auschwitz, in which she helped gather gunpowder.

After a year of collaborated efforts, homemade bombs exploded part of

the camp and crematorium, more than 100 prisoners escaped. Nearly all were caught and shot immediately. Ala was tortured into confessing and hanged; a monument to her and three other heroines from Auschwitz stands in Jerusalem.

Not everyone involved appreciated Kirschner's efforts with the letters.

Kirschner's daughters accused her during her of caring more about the historical Sala than the living one during her fervor to research the letters and their background.

Her own mother sometimes asks, "Did you really have to do this?" However, her mother had given her the letters with "no strings attached" and supported Kirschner in all of her decisions, acknowledging that otherwise the memory of some characters would disappear completely. Ala, for example, died without any family to remember her.

Kirschner refers to Ala as Sala's "mentor, her friend and her fairy godmother." "We suffered terribly but in spite of everything, we survived," Sala's sister Raizel wrote after liberation. "My hands

are trembling. I am jumping around, going crazy. I am delirious."

Ironically, although Kirschner considers this letter the most important of the collection and now reads it every year for Passover, her aunt dismissed her own letters as "rubbish" and had no interest in seeing them.

Yet the letters continue to inspire in their exhibition online, in the book and in the play.

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STAGING HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S TALE



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SALA GARNCARZ KIRSCHNER COLLECTION

A postcard Sala Garncarz Kirschner, left, received at the Geppersdorf labor camp was one of many she kept secret for 50 years because she feared frightening her children.

MOM'S PAINFUL SECRET BECOMES ROLLINS PLAY



"How do you put together a shattered life? This is where my admiration for my mother becomes so strong."

— Ann Kirschner.

By Matthew J. Palm
THEATER CRITIC

Ann Kirschner was confused by the bundle of faded letters and postcards her mother passed across the kitchen table 20 years ago.

For one thing, they were written in German — even though her mother was Polish.

"I said, 'What!? What are these?'" Kirschner recalls.

The letters were the manifestation of a 50-year secret kept by Sala Kirschner.

Sala, a native of Poland, had endured years in Nazi work camps during World War II — and smuggled out more than 350 letters, photographs and a diary chronicling her life there.

"The letters became an obsession with me," said her daughter, Ann Kirschner. "Each one became another piece of the jigsaw puzzle."

The revelations they contained sent Ann Kirschner on a journey through her family — and the world's — history, at times upsetting her mother and even her own children. Ultimately, she wrote a book, "Sala's Gift," which Rollins College alumna Arlene Hutton adapted into a play, "Letters to Sala."

The play opened Friday at Rollins' Annie Russell Theatre, and Ann Kirschner will speak to theatergoers after a performance today.

"How do you put together a shattered life?" said Ann Kirschner, 59. "This is where my admiration for my mother becomes so strong."



Sala Garncarz Kirschner, right, poses with her friend Ala Gertner, who would later be hanged at Auschwitz.



Sala and Sidney Kirschner, shown in July, met in Europe in the aftermath of WWII.

If you go: 'Letters to Sala'

What: "Letters to Sala"

Where: Rollins College's Annie Russell Theatre, 1000 Holt Ave., Winter Park

When: 4 p.m. today, 8 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, and 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday

Cost: Tickets are \$20, \$10 for students; call 407-646-2145.

Please turn to SALA, B4