

A Daughter Shines Light on Her Mother's Story



Ann Kirschner and her mother, Sala Garnarcz Kirschner.

FAMILY SECRETS TAKE ON A POWER OF THEIR OWN. They gain strength from the secret's keeper and are nurtured—made all the more mysterious—through the complicit silence of family members who dare not ask. Finally, family secrets have the power to influence generations that follow. This is something that Ann Kirschner—whose mother's story was hidden not just from her family, but from her mother's Nazi captors in the labor camps where Sala Garnarcz was imprisoned from 1940 to 1945—knows well.

Were it not for her dual instincts for survival and courage, we might never have known about the letters saved by a spirited 16-year-old during her five-year ordeal of internment. Similarly, it was a daughter's determination that has brought those letters to their current resting place—The New York Public Library (NYPL). The letters were donated in April 2005 to the Library's Dorot Jewish Division by Ann Kirschner and her family. There, 100 of them now form the basis for the exhibition in which they are being displayed for the first time. How the letters came to light is story enough, but how and why they have come to be made available to the public is another chapter that deserves telling.

The power of the written word to sustain life is a theme of *Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps*, the exhibition of rare Holocaust-era letters, photographs and diary entries at The New York Public Library's Humanities and Social Sciences Library. "As primary documents of the Nazi labor camps, these letters are an invaluable resource for those who study the Holocaust and are among the most fascinating to have been given to the Library in many years," said Paul LeClerc, President of The New York Public Library. "At the same time, as a collection of intensely personal letters, they bring the terrible human consequences of Nazi forced labor to vivid life, and show the effect of this experience on both the interned Jews and their torn families." The exhibition, thoughtfully curated by Jill Vexler, is on view through June 17, 2006 in the Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Gallery on the library's first floor and admission is free.

In all, there are 300 letters sent to Sala by friends and family from outside and within the camps. In their Yiddish, Polish and German script faded across 60 years, they were painstakingly saved and hidden away—first from the Nazis and later from her own family in the United States. "These letters were my most precious thing," Sala has said. Nonetheless, she tucked them away, not sharing them with Sidney Kirschner, the American G.I. she eventually married, or with their children—including Ann—until 1991. Then, facing a triple bypass, she presented her daughter with a box. "These are my letters from the war," she said. Finally, it was time, and in Sala's mind her children were old enough to bear hearing the story. "They're yours now," she said. With that, Ann Kirschner became caretaker of her mother's memories and guardian of the letters.

"The idea of doing something with the letters was mine," says Kirschner. "So I set out to learn the story behind the letters." That journey took her to two continents and spanned 12 years. It set her off on a detective investigation marked by painstaking research and "some lucky breaks." Slowly she pieced together who wrote the letters, what they meant to her mother, and how they fit to form a picture of her mother's early life. It was a search borne out of tremendous personal curiosity and a deep need to discover who her mother had been—the mother whose history had been so hidden from view for so long.

"I followed the trail around the world to many different libraries and historians. My first lucky break was finding the family of Harry Haubenstein—a young suitor of my mother's. A German relative of my husband's had been in Frankfurt and opened the phone directory. Just opened it and found a relative of Haubenstein's."

"Another big breakthrough came at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York where I met the legendary librarian Dina Abramovitch, a walking encyclopedia of the Yiddish-speaking world. She directed me to a Nazi bureaucrat named Albrecht Schmelt, and that led me to a Polish historian with whom I

corresponded for years. A lot of what I learned about Nazi slave labor camps has not been published in English at all." This comes out in a rush of words that reflects the drive and tenacity that Kirschner exudes.

The Search for a Partnership

Kirschner notes that there was a long hiatus during which not much progress was made, but that ended in 2002 with the death of her Aunt. "It jolted me awake. I knew that I had been my mother's first partner in taking care of the letters, now it was most important to ensure the future of the letters." That meant selecting an institutional partner. "In my mind, papers are inert until someone turns the lights on and brings them back to life. If you imagine a future life for the documents, then your selection should be one where it is a true partnership. I wanted an institution that I knew would be a bridge to historians, artists, other families of survivors, researchers, school kids, and anyone whose curiosity would lead them to the letters."

Of her choice of The New York Public Library, Kirschner says, "I spent so much time there as a kid. And really, it's a New York story." Now a writer and media consultant, Kirschner herself trained at the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the NYPL, "That gave me the tools to catalogue—something I put to good use during my research."

At the NYPL she found archivists who were as keen on universalizing the story as she was. "Of course this is a Holocaust story, but it's also a story about world history, the psychology of hope and survival, the economics of war, and the tragedy of genocide. I knew that in a digital era the letters had to be available so scholars could see them online. I also felt that the perception of the collection and its context would best be served by a world renowned institution with a broad spectrum of intellectual interests. The NYPL committed to assuring that the letters will be available to anyone who wants to see them."

Kirschner's involvement doesn't end



here. Together with historians Deborah Dwork, Director of the Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies

at Clark University, and Robert Jan van Pelt, Professor of Cultural History at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, she has written an illustrated companion volume to the exhibition, *Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps*. The volume is available from The Library Shop (www.the.libraryshop.org). A second book by Kirschner, *Sala's Gift*, will be published by Free Press in November 2006. Also, documentary filmmaker Murray Nossel is currently directing a feature-length film about Sala Garnarcz's life, *Sarenka: The Letter Carrier*. Despite her close involvement in the making of the film, as of this writing, Kirschner has chosen not to view the movie, preferring to remain connected to the primary documents themselves and their preservation.

Sala Garnarcz Kirschner celebrated her 82nd birthday and 60th wedding anniversary in March 2006, surrounded by her children and her grandchildren.

"My family and I are delighted that through The New York Public Library's exhibition, the public will have the opportunity to learn my mother's incredible story of survival and courage," says Ann Kirschner. "When the world seemed entirely hostile, a young girl found refuge and hope in these remarkable letters written by her family and friends. Their words will now be preserved and made accessible to the historians and artists whose insights will help future generations to understand the lessons of the past."

Above: A treasured valentine to Sala. Below: Two photos of Sala—one with her American G.I. husband, Sidney Kirschner, the second in one of the seven Nazi labor camps where she was imprisoned.



"LETTERS TO SALA: A YOUNG WOMAN'S LIFE IN NAZI LABOR CAMPS" THROUGH JUNE 17 SUE & EDGAR WACHENHEIM III GALLERY (FIRST FLOOR) HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE LIBRARY NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY 5TH AVENUE & 42ND ST., NEW YORK, NY LETTERS TO SALA REVEALS RARE DOCUMENTATION OF NAZI ATROCITIES WRITTEN BY THE VICTIMS OF THOSE EVENTS DURING THE TIME THEY WERE UNFOLDING.