

# 'Sala's Gift' By Ann Kirschner

BOOK REVIEW BY  
MICHELE JUSTIC

How can we keep the Holocaust from becoming a historical artifact? When survivors will no longer be able to tell their tales in person to Yom HaShoah gatherings, will our youth think of the Holocaust in the same light as the Spanish Inquisition—something very bad but in a fuzzy, long ago way? The Shoah Foundation and other independent efforts are scrambling to get every last memory down on print or film, but will future generations care to read or see it?

While I can't completely answer those questions, I can present another fighter in the memorial battle—Ann Kirschner. Kirschner was an accomplished professional, educator, and writer before receiving a "gift" from her mother, Sala. Sala Garncaz Kirschner had opted to keep her Holocaust memories silent for decades—until 1991, as the date for her heart surgery loomed near. Then she presented Ann with a box of over 350 letters and photos from her days in a slave labor camp. Other Holocaust memoirs rely on survivor memories and official Nazi and Allied military documentation and evidence. Sala—through luck, bravery, charm, and, of course, the will of Hashem—managed to avoid the unbearable torture of the concentration camps and instead served as a seamstress in the less well-

known slave labor camps. While presenting slightly less life-threatening circumstances, these camps allowed prisoners to receive and send mail and photos. These cherished letters helped Sala retain something many survivors could not cling to—a sense of humanity. Kirschner utilized her mother's "gift" to its fullest, first by deciphering the contents through translation and historical research, and second by lending the material to galleries, publishing the book, and having it interpreted in a film documentary and for stage presentations.

The letters and photos bring to life Sala's difficult teenage years. At age 16, Sala sought new adventures and also to protect her studious and frail sister, Raizel, from the enlistment orders she had received from the government. So, she went in her stead to what became known as "Organization Schmelt." Albrecht Schmelt helped create the business plan for a system of exploiting free labor to build roads, munitions, and other materiel for the Nazis. His network of camps worked together with opportunistic Jewish leaders to recruit and maintain high-quality personnel to aid in the war effort. While "Rosie the Riveter" helped the cause of patriotism on our side of the Atlantic, Sala and her friends were forced to do the same under horrifying conditions. The laborers also lived in bunks (though Sala was

*Continued on Page 51*

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## 'Salas Gift'

Continued from Page 49

usually lucky enough to share a room exclusively with her friend Ala Gertner), ate poor food, wore only the clothes they came in with, and worked long hours under high pressure. Most frightening, however, was the prospect of being sent to a concentration camp.

Sala's act of extraordinary initiative—serving in a labor camp in her sister's place—became one of the defining moments of her life. While almost everyone in her hometown of Sosnowiec, including her parents, Yosef and Chana, and most of her 10 siblings died from starvation, illness, or extermination at the hands of the Nazis, Sala managed to survive through her own wiles and those of the woman she befriended on that pivotal train ride, Ala Gertner.

Ala's life could fill a book of its own. This feisty ingénue had her hands in many pots. Her flirtations with men of all sorts helped earn her high rankings and allowed her a position where she could aid in the resistance groups. Her friendship with Sala started with a simple promise to Sala's frightened mother at the train station and grew to become a maternal love in its own right.

Sala's life in the ghetto and in the camps is fascinating and uplifting. The faith and love between her family members certainly played a large part in her survival. She continued to make cherished friendships with Ala and others, which also helped her maintain what could unfortunately be considered, in comparison to others victimized by the Holocaust, an almost privileged lifestyle. Sala had a burdensome work schedule, but also benefited from greater food and conditions than other Jews of the time. Her friends helped sustain her in practical, social, and emotional ways. They traded helpful hints as well as beautiful birthday cards and poems from friends, reassuring words from home, and even love letters from a few men.

Though Josef, Chana's father, was a rabbi, sadly some of the traditions of the Garnarcz family did not survive the Holocaust. The Kirschner family is now traditional but modern, and at some points Ann refers to letters from Raizel as "preachy." She continued to view her aunt in this manner in real life as well. I think that through this labor of love for her mother, she can't help but reconnect somewhat with her family's ways.

In any event, Ann has suc-

ceeded in keeping alive the memories of Raizel, Sala, and many other victims of the Shoah through her extensive research and her gift for language.

Upon being asked to lead a book club discussion about a "Holocaust book," I became a bit weary. I know it is our duty to remember this tragedy in light of all who deny it. Yet, does anyone ever look forward to reading a book about deprivations and destruction? That low feeling is building up now as we prepare for Tishah B'Av. Yet *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (Free Press) is fascinating as a coming-of-age story amid the backdrop of a changing world. Newly released in paperback, it will deepen the reader's understanding of the triumph of humanity during an inhumane period. ♦

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