



## Nazi-era mementos are letter-perfect

By BARBARA HOFFMAN

**T**HEY were only letters and postcards, but they were all 16-year-old Sala Garncarz had to remind her of life outside the Nazi slave-labor camps.

Even after she was freed five years later — after most of her family had perished in Poland — she tucked away the only things that had given her hope during the Holocaust, keeping them in a closet for 50 years. But fearing they'd be lost after her death, she finally showed them to her daughter.

These letters — along with diary excerpts, photos and such artifacts as a brass comb — go on display today at the New York Public Library, providing a rare look at circumstances some refuse to remember and others are afraid to forget.

"They tell a remarkable story about the economics of war, the politics of racism and genocide, and the psychology of hope and survival," said library director David Ferriero at yesterday's unveiling, attended by Sala Garncarz Kirschner, a tiny, elegant woman of 83; Sidney Kirschner, her husband of 60 years (he was an American GI who took her to New York after the war); and their children.

After the Germans invaded Poland, Sala's scholarly, pious older sister was ordered to report to a labor camp, but Sala took her place, certain she'd be able to bear it better.

"How do I say goodbye?" Sala wrote in her diary the day she left. "One more kiss, one more hug. My mother does not want to let go of me . . . I say goodbye to my sisters."

That excerpt and others were

translated from the Polish, German and Yiddish in which they'd been written. Many of the postcards bear a stamp picturing Adolf Hitler, and are marked with the Z that showed they'd been approved by Nazi censors.

On display, too, is the worn wallet in which Sala had hidden her correspondence at the seven labor camps where she was sentenced. There, she and her fellow laborers built the Autobahn, dug trenches, sewed and cooked without pay.

While they were allowed to write letters and receive them, they were forbidden to save them, and young Sala did so at her peril, hiding them in her clothes, burying them under buildings and passing them on to friends to avoid discovery.

Once in New York, where she moved with her young husband, she hid the letters and photos in a box

in the closet. Only in 1991, when she was facing cardiac surgery, did she show them to her family, for fear that bit of history would be lost forever.

"Once she escaped, she wanted to live in the present, and not burden her family with her nightmares," explains her daughter, Ann Kirschner, who's publishing a book about her mother, out this fall.

Miraculously, much of Sala's letters aren't nightmarish at all. Along with warm tidings from her friends and family are homemade Valentines, birthday greetings and reports of preparations for Passover.

And then there are Sala's own words, after the war, when she wrote to her future mother-in-law:

"About me, there's nothing much to write — a plain Jewish girl from a kosher home and that's all."

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Sala Garncarz with her future husband, Cpl. Sidney Kirschner, in 1946.