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Book Review

Letters From Hell

Improbably, the author's mother safeguarded a personal archive in a Nazi camp.

SALA'S GIFT
My Mother's Holocaust Story.
By Ann Kirschner.
Illustrated. 287 pp. Free Press. $26.

By BLAKE ESKIN

IN 1991, Ann Kirschner's mother handed her a red cardboard box. It was familiar, the packaging from a game called Spill and Spell that Kirschner remembered from her childhood. But it no longer held the alphabetic dice that she had once hastily arranged into words. Instead, she found letters of another sort, pieces of a lifelong puzzle that until then she had no way of solving.

Born in Poland, Sala Garncarz Kirschner had always avoided spelling out details about the members of her large family who had perished in the Holocaust, or about her own wartime ordeal. But at 67 and about to undergo a triple bypass, Sala passed down a sheaf of papers to her daughter that she had amassed between 1940, when as a teenager she began what she thought would be a six-week stint in a Nazi labor camp, and 1946, when she arrived as a war bride in New York.

Sala, Ann Kirschner discovered, had endured nearly five years in a network of labor camps known as Organization Schmelt. Conditions were brutal, but prisoners could write and receive mail; friends and suitors on the inside passed notes as well. Improbably, Sala emerged at the end of the war, after multiple transfers and countless inspections, not only with her life but with this personal archive. The New York Public Library acquired it for its permanent collection; a film documentary and theatrical adaptation are reported to be in the works.

In "Sala's Gift," Kirschner draws on her mother's papers and on interviews with Sala (whose heart operation was successful) and other survivors. Sala was the youngest of 11 children of a Hebrew teacher in Sosnowiec, a town in southwest Poland that may be familiar to readers of "Maus" as the prewar home of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman. When her sister Raizel received a summons from the Nazis to appear at the railroad station, Sala reported in her place and was taken to Geppersdorf, a camp where the male laborers were put to work building a new highway and the women did domestic chores. At the beginning, Sala kept a diary, chronicling the tasks she performed, the deportations of others and her own battle with despair: "Dear God, will Fridays always worry me so much when I am away from home?"

Sala's voice soon fades — except for one unmailed note, the letters she sent are lost — so Kirschner quotes extensively from her correspondents, especially Raizel, whose panicked missives chart the family's escalating impoverishment, degradation and peril through August 1942, when the Nazis emptied Sosnowiec of Jews. Most of the family was shipped off to Auschwitz, but Raizel and another sister were assigned to a Schmelt camp (and also survived). The letters, which had to pass German censors, are not always as dramatic as the sheer fact of their existence, and Kirschner might have told her mother's story — the story of her imprisonment, but also of her coming-of-age — more effectively had she included fewer.

That said, Raizel's letters and those from other friends and relatives that Kirschner draws on to tell her mother's story stand as evidence of humanity in the face of terrible conditions and of the religious faith and ritual that persisted despite the Nazi campaign to eliminate the Jews. And they show that even in labor camps, there were occasions for flirting. "Salusia, were you afraid yesterday during bunk inspection?" wrote Harry Haubenstock, a fellow prisoner who wooed Sala in a note that went unread by the censors. "Always have a coat ready that you can throw over your shoulders quickly; you looked very cute in your pajamas." □

From "Sala's Gift"

Sala Garncarz at 12.

Blake Eskin is the Web editor of The New Yorker and the author of "A Life in Pieces: The Making and Unmaking of Binjamin Wilkomirski."