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 Garncarz’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, Aia, 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 to as “Pandora’s box” and “a pebble in water.”

Sala’s letters are now part of the Detroit 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...” see SPEAKER, page 10

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 Garncarz (played by sophomore theatre major Amanda Rohr) 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 ’50s New York apartment; on the left, an even simpler set of... see PLAY, page 10
SALA
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Born Sala Garmiack, she was the youngest of 11 children in a poor Jewish family in Sosnowiec, Poland, near the German border. In October 1940, she was 15 when her older sister Raizel was ordered to report to the Nazi labor camp at 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.

Pleading 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 Kirschen knew nothing of her mother's ordeal until 1948, when she saw last letters, carefully saved for five decades. For propagandist 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, like her mother, 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 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 Kirschen called it, 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 Kirschen said.

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

**Pieces of history**

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

Among her mother's friends at one of the camps was Alia 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 Kirschen after learning of her book.

"So here it is, 20 years and the effects keep coming," said Ann Kirschen, who is dean of Macaulay Honors College in New York.

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

Ann Kirschen's college-age daughters surprised her most when wanting to make the letters public.

"My daughter felt very protective of me; she said, I was not sympathetic, and I did not handle it well."

Sala Kirschen 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 Garmiack Kirschen 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 the dead," Ann Kirschen said. "Thankfully it was all resolved in a very positive way."

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

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**PLAY**

**Stresses friendship**

not from front and table and chairs sit in World War II- ridden Poland. Theatre professor Roger Hall back and forth scenes between the era, 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 Ariel Kock and Lindsay Watt), 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 the sisters 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 Alia (senior theatre major Noel Edwards) reasons.

And it's this form of communication that allows Sala to surive; 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 isolation. It is through her letters, the only expression of individuality she has, that she gains a sense of freedom.

Sala's epistolary craft reflects Alia'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 Dowdway; her friends, especially Alia; and her romances (including the only animated character, Harry Haubenstock, played by senior theatre major Andrew Darnell)."Letters to Sala" had an almost unceasingly 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 herself — 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.

**SPEAKER**

**Granddaughters oppose sharing Holocaust letters with public**

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for it," Jordan Conroy, a junior history major and the dramatic play for the play based on Sala's book, had read the book and said that Kirschen's presentation was exactly like it, but the extra detail about Alia's story was "incredible." My mother and her friend Alia took very different paths toward resistance and heroism," Kirschen said.

She showed her heroine by preserving the letters from camp to camp, despite the risk of punishment — keeping letters was utterly forbidden. "Alia took part of an escape plot at Auschwitz," she added.

After a year of collaborative efforts, homemade bombs exploded part of the camp and crematorium, more than 100 prisoners escaped. Nearly all were caught and shot immediately. Alia was tortured into confessing and hanged; a monument to and three her heroines from Auschwitz stands in Jerusalem.

Not everyone involved appreciated Kirschen's efforts with the letters. Kirschen's daughters accused her of "going over the top" during her efforts to make 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 Kirschen in all of her decisions, acknowledging that otherwise the memory of some characters would disappear completely. Alia, for example, died without any family to remember her.

Kirschen refers to Alia as Sala's "nurse, 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 delicious!"

Ironically, although Kirschen 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.
STAGING HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR'S TALE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SALA GARNCARZ KIRSCHNER COLLECTION
A postcard Sala Garncarz Kirschner, left, received at the Gep-
persdorf 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

By Matthew J. Palm
THEATER CRITIC

Ann Kirschner was confused by the
bundle of faded letters and post-
cards 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."

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