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WARTIME LIFELINE

'Letters to Sala' illustrates one woman's concentration camp life



"Letters to Sala" is on loan to Temple Beth Israel from the New York Public Library through March 27. Sala's daughter, Ann Kirschner, will give a lecture at 7:30 p.m. on March 25.

By RANDI BJORNSTAD
The Register-Guard

The world long has mourned the loss of Anne Frank, a young Jewish girl who was born in Germany, spent much of her life in The Netherlands and created her famous diary as she hid with her family during the Holocaust until discovered by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp, where she and her sister, Margot, perished of typhus shortly before the end of World War II.

Her father, Otto Frank, survived the war and retrieved her diary. He eventually consented to having it published, and it has become one of the world's most widely read books and an internationally renowned icon of atrocities committed by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

Now comes the story of another Jewish girl, Sala Garnarcz. She was born in Poland in 1924, five years before Frank. When Garnarcz was 16 years old — Frank died at 15 — she was among tens of thousands of able-bodied Jewish people sent to the Nazis' extensive network of slave labor camps, as opposed to death camps. An expert seamstress, she spent the rest of the war primarily sewing and doing laundry for the officers in a series of seven work camps before being liberated by Allied forces in 1945.

Like Frank, Garnarcz also kept a diary, amassing a secret cache of some 350 letters, postcards and photographs during her first three years of captivity when the Nazis still allowed inmates in the labor camps to send and receive mail, to persuade the rest of Europe that workers in its camps, although not free to come and go, were allowed contact with the outside world.

But unlike Frank, whose life became well-known worldwide in the years following the war, Garnarcz hid her own away from view for nearly 50 years.

Although many among her family and friends were sent to Nazi death camps and died in the gas chambers, Garnarcz survived the Holocaust. She turned 88 years old earlier this month and divides

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"How many people get to meet their mother, as a young girl, in that way?"

— ANN KIRSCHNER, TURNED LETTERS INTO A BOOK



BRIAN DAVIES/The Register-Guard

Temple Beth Israel is hosting an exhibit consisting of examples of 350 letters and postcards written to Sala Garnarcz, who at 16 was imprisoned as a slave laborer in concentration camps for five years, from 1940 until liberation in 1945.

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THE REGISTER-GUARD OREGON LIFE SUNDAY

2012

Lifeline: Mother didn't want daughter to know of suffering

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her time between Monsey, N.Y., and Pembroke Pines, Fla.

"Like a time capsule"

After the war, when Garnarcz married a young American soldier, Sidney Kirschner, and emigrated to the East Coast of the United States, the new Mrs. Kirschner stashed her letters — and with them any mention of her wartime past — away in a cardboard box. Not until 1991, when she faced a serious heart operation, did she show them to her daughter, Ann Kirschner.

Kirschner, now 60 and university dean at the Macaulay Honors College at City University of New York, spent years sorting, researching and compiling the material into a book called "Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story." In 2005, the Kirschner family donated the original documents to the New York Public Library.

About 100 of the original letters, postcards, photographs and other documents from Sala Kirschner's years of captivity have been consolidated into a traveling exhibit, "Letters to Sala," on loan from the library. The collection is on view at Temple Beth Israel in south Eugene until March 27.

On March 25, Ann Kirschner will give a free, public presentation at the Singer Family Lecturer in Judaic Studies at the University of Oregon, sponsored by the Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies and part of the annual Western Jewish Studies Association Conference, held this year at the UO.

Ann Kirschner remembers well the day her mother, worried that she might not

LETTERS TO SALA

A lifeline of letters written during the Holocaust document the survival and courage of one young Jewish woman, Sala Garnarcz, during five years of captivity in a Nazi slave labor camp.

Exhibit: Temple Beth Israel, 1175 E. 29th Ave., Eugene; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Thursday; 10 a.m. to noon Friday through March 27, or by special arrangement

Lecture: 7:30 p.m. Sunday, March 25, at Temple Beth Israel, by Ann Kirschner, daughter of Sala Garnarcz Kirschner and this year's Singer Family Lecturer in Judaic Studies sponsored by the Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies at the University of Oregon; free

Book: "Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story," by Ann Kirschner, available at Temple Beth Israel, or online at amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, indiebound.com or booksamillion.com

Information: 541-485-7218

survive open heart surgery, revealed her past.

"She was afraid I would find the letters after she died and not understand what they were," Kirschner said in a telephone interview. "Seeing them was like a time capsule — how many people get to meet their mother, as a young girl, in that way? There is no other collection in the world like this that I have seen."

Until that time, she knew very little about her mother's pre-American life, Kirschner said. "I knew she was the youngest of 11 children, and I knew her parents' names and her hometown. I knew she had been in a camp for awhile, but I assumed it was just one. I knew that all during my childhood she had kept a picture of herself and another, older woman looking into each other's eyes on her bedside table, but I never knew who it was. After she showed me the letters, it was that picture that ignited my curiosity and set me on the path to documenting what had happened."

A watchful eye

As she pieced together the story of her mother's life, Kirschner learned that the older woman in the photograph with Sala was Ala Gertner. The day Sala Garnarcz left her family for the work camp, Gertner watched the girl's distressed mother bid her youngest child good-bye. Gertner told Sala's mother that she would take care of her, Kirschner said. "Ala was highly educated, and she taught my mother German — that was the only way she was able to send letters to relatives and friends, because the Nazis would only allow the inmates in the camps to write in German, so they could read it."

Years later, at Auschwitz, Gertner was one of four women publicly hanged shortly before the camp was liberated, for her part in a conspiracy to smuggle gunpowder to an underground group that already had blown up a crematorium and was planning an escape.

But early on, Gertner may

well have saved Sala's life when she told her, "Whatever they say needs doing, you volunteer to do it," Kirschner said. "Sala became the 'clean Jew' who did all the laundry and mending. And it brought her close to a German family that was extremely kind to her."

When first in the labor camp, "there was no sewing machine there, so they sent her to a nearby tailor who had one and agreed to let it be used," she said. "The people in the tailor's family fed my mother and gave her clothes — they even sent money to her parents — because they had a daughter her age."

Contact with the German family ended when the camp requisitioned its own sewing machine. "But they still sent their son who was a German soldier in uniform to check on her, and he delivered little packages to her," Kirschner said. "They were people who acted with simple goodness."

A ripple effect

After her mother revealed her past, Kirschner tried for years to find the German family, without success. "After my book was published, I realized that all that time I had the wrong spelling of their last name," she said. "After that, I was able to locate the family. The tailor and his wife were no longer living, but I met their grandson, still living in Germany. He is very proud of his grandparents and his mother for what they did for my mother."

Of course, Sala Garnarcz Kirschner's own half of all her correspondence is irretrievable, "because no one else survived the war to save it," Kirschner

said. "But I have found other documents that show more about her own role during those years."

For example, when she visited Prague recently, Kirschner found a list of the women who had been in the camp at Schatzlar, Czechoslovakia, just before liberation, "and my mother's name is on it," she said. "I also found the manuscript of a play that was written and performed by the inmates, just three days before liberation — it was a thinly disguised allegory of life in the camp — and it was signed by all the performers to the (female) overseer of the camp. My mother's signature is there."

Historical records show that the overseer of the camp was arrested after the war, "and the women all rallied around her, saying that she had been as good to them as could be under the circumstances," Kirschner said. "That document also has become part of the record, and I digitized it immediately. It reminds me that my own project has ripple effects that will go on long after either my mother or I are still alive."

Once reticent about sharing her past, Sala Garnarcz Kirschner now realizes how important it is to share her history, Kirschner said.

"She told me that she hid it all partly because she didn't want us to feel guilty about what she had suffered, but now she realizes that we only get one chance to influence the next generation. Now, when she thinks about her long silence, she says, 'I must have done it for a reason.' I believe the plan eventually made itself known."