Daughter shares her mother’s story as a slave

BY NANCY KIRSCH

ABOUT ME there is not much to tell; I am a nice Jewish girl from a kosher home,” wrote Sala Garnarz to her future mother-in-law. While Sala may well have been a nice Jewish girl, there was, indeed, much to tell.

On March 5, the day Sala celebrated her 85th birthday and her 63rd wedding anniversary, her daughter, Ann Kirschner, Ph.D., spoke of the more than 350 letters Sala received as an inmate in labor camps during the Holocaust. The event was organized by the University of Rhode Island’s Providence campus and the Holocaust Education and Resource Center of Rhode Island.

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“You open up a door and it’s 1941,” said Ann, author of Sala’s Gift, My Mother’s Holocaust Story (published by Simon & Schuster, and now available in English, German, Polish and Italian) about the treasure trove of letters that her mother had hidden away for nearly 50 years. About to undergo heart surgery, Sala gave her daughter a box that Ann thought would contain jewelry. Instead, the box contained a window into her mother’s past – a past that Sala hadn’t discussed with Ann or her brothers.

The youngest of 11 children in a Polish family, Sala thought she would have a six-week adventure when she responded to a letter from the government sent to her older sister, Razel. It ordered Razel to report to work to cook for workers building the highway between Poland and Germany that would become the autobahn. At 16, Sala was ready for a paid adventure – and, because Razel was timid and shy, Sala offered to go in her place. Sala’s anticipated adventure turned into five years in seven different labor camps.

She returned, but to a changed world – most of her family had perished in the war.

“Each letter was like a piece of a jigsaw,” said Ann, a dean at City University of New York. “Memories may change, but archival material doesn’t.”

Remarkably, the Germans allowed those in the labor camps to receive mail, said Jill Vexler, Ph.D., the curator of the exhibit of pictures, postcards and letters that was part of the evening’s presentation.

Ann Kirschner

“Letters tell an untold Holocaust story

“In my family, a slave isn’t a metaphor, it’s my mother’s story.”

The gallery exhibit, “The Holocaust: Women and Resistance – The Will to Survive and Thrive,” runs through April 30 at the URI Providence campus, 80 Washington St., Providence. In addition to “Letters to Sala – A Young Woman’s Life in Nazi Labor Camps,” it includes, “My Mother’s Story – A Kindertransport Story,” with a presentation by Brown professor Peter Neuwirt on March 19 at 7 p.m., and “Trust In the Journey: Becoming a Family – Marie, Jeanette, and Rash,” a play premiere on March 29 at 2 p.m.

All events are free and open to the public for information, call 277-5206 or spennell@etal.uri.edu.