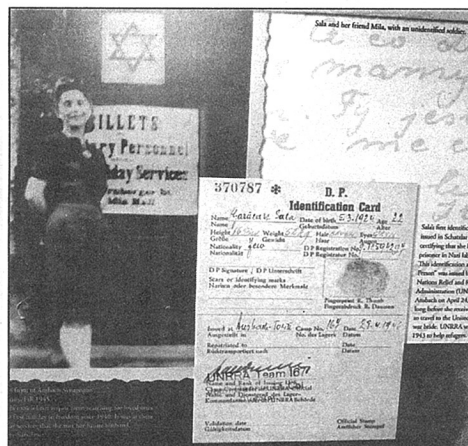
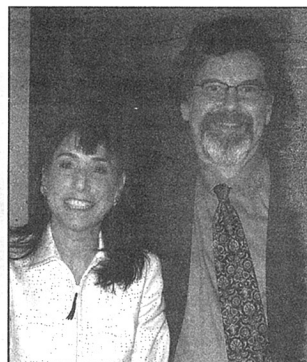


THE BOOK PAGE



Photos by Nancy Kirsch

THE EXHIBIT shows Sala's identification card



ANN KIRSCHNER, left, and Steve Pennell at "The Holocaust: Women and Resistance – The Will to Survive and Thrive."

Letters tell an untold Holocaust story

Daughter shares her mother's story as a slave

By NANCY KIRSCH
nkirsch@jfri.org

ABOUT ME there is not much to tell; I am a nice Jewish girl from a kosher home," wrote Sara Garncaz to her future mother-in-law. While Sara 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.

Risking her life, Sala kept these letters and postcards hidden away as she moved from camp to camp.

"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, Raizel. It ordered Raizel 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 Raizel 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, post-

"In my family, being a slave isn't a metaphor, it's my mother's story."

Ann Kirschner

cards and letters that was part of the evening's presentation.

The rationale? Vexler explained that receiving mail was a morale booster to those in the camps (and, you may work harder if you're happier) and helped reinforce to those outside that life in the camp wasn't so bad. Vexler pointed out the large "Z" on the correspondence denoted that the letter had been censored. In the camps, Sala was given two stamped postcards, pen and ink every two weeks.

"Sala's letters weren't literature," said Vexler, "they were a connection, a way to be with the people she loved. Those postcards and letters saved her life and, at the same time, they jeopardized it."

The archival material includes only one letter from

Sala to Raizel and Sala's diary — nothing else from that time is in Sala's handwriting.

"Every Passover, we read Raizel's letter to Sala (written after she discovers Sala is still alive)," said Ann. "In my family, being a slave isn't a metaphor, it's my mother's story."

After she was liberated in May 1945, Sala traveled to find her sisters, Raizel and Blima, who had been freed the month before. En route, she traveled through Bavaria and stopped in a small town called Anspach to worship at High Holiday services.

Remarkably, years earlier, the mayor had disguised or concealed the building so that it wouldn't be destroyed on Kristallnacht.

At that synagogue, at those services, Sala met her future husband, Sydney Kirschner, an American soldier stationed in the area. Sydney returned to the U.S. within weeks after their March 5, 1946, civil marriage in Germany (a Jewish wedding followed in the U.S.)

"Sala's letters represent the inverse of Pandora's box," said Ann. "Out of Sala's box, came letters... love, friendship, family, faith and community."

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 Neivert on March 19 at 7 p.m., and *"Trust In the Journey: Becoming a Family – Marie, Jeannette, and Ruth,"* 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.