Women in peril under the Third Reich

Exhibits and a play at URI's Providence campus examine their fate during Nazi rule

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Holocaust history comes to Providence. And it arrives for women's history month.

The Providence campus of URI presents "The Holocaust: Women's Stories — The Will to Survive and Thrive." It's not one event but three exhibits and one play. Yet in different ways they tell the same story, of peoples perservering.

"It's more than just getting through, but living and flourishing," says Stevens Pennell, URI's coordinator of arts and culture and curator of the exhibit. "It's a really positive story."

Pennell is thinking of the story "Sala's Gift," which is how this project began. About two years ago he was talking with the curator of that project, Neiver. He learned in New York, where Ann Kirschner is a dean at the City University of New York. Her mother, Sala Garmarcz Kirschner, was a Holocaust survivor who worked in seven different Nazi labor camps in five years. During that time, she saved about 350 letters, dozens of postcards and a large diary.

"If she had been caught with them, she would have been killed," Pennell says. "This whole story she began to tell her daughter. And they embarked on a journey together to share this whole story."

"Women's Stories' of Holocaust

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The sharing involves an exhibit stop in Providence. And on Thursday at 7 p.m. there will be an opening reception.

To the "Sala's Gift" exhibit, another has been added, one with a Rhode Island connection: "My Mother's Story." This is the story of his mother, Neiver. In France, the story is told by the Bavarian-based family of the third woman featured in the play, which is titled Trust in the Journey: Becoming Family — Maria, Jeanette and Ruth.

My Mother's Story is a one-act, 35-minute play written by Frank Toti, a history instructor at Rhode Island College and a Holocaust survivor. "My Mother's Story" tells the story of her mother, Sala Garmarcz Kirschner, who worked at a labor camp in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria.

The story begins with Sala Garmarcz Kirschner's arrival in iron boxes, where she is separated from her family. Sala's mother, Maria, and her sister, Ruth, are also separated, and the father, Toti, is killed. Sala is sent to work in a textile factory, where she meets a German Jewish man named Neiver. They fall in love and marry, and together they try to survive the war.

"My Mother's Story" is set in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Sala and Neiver are trying to rebuild their lives in the United States. Sala is determined to keep her family's memory alive, and she begins to write a diary in which she documents her experiences during the Holocaust.

"My Mother's Story" is a powerful and moving story that brings to life the experiences of Sala Garmarcz Kirschner and other women who survived the Holocaust. It is a reminder of the importance of remembering and honoring the memory of those who suffered and died during this terrible time in history.

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Sala Garmarcz Kirschner kisses her granddaughter Abby at a public reading of her letters in New York in 2006.