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'The girls owed their lives to people whose names they never knew'

Women in peril under the Third Reich

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

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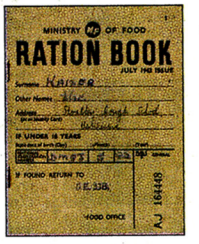
Holocaust history comes to Providence. And it arrives for women's history month.

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

"It's more than just getting through, but living and flourishing," says Steven Pennell, URI's coordinator of arts and culture and curator of the exhibit. "It's a real 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 exhibit, which is based in New York, where Ann Kirschner is a dean at the City University of New York. Her mother, Sala Garncarz 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 photographs and a 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."



Images from "My Mother's Story," one of two exhibits at URI's Providence campus.

'Women's Stories' of Holocaust

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The sharing involves an exhibit stop in Providence. And on Thursday at 7 p.m., Kirschner will attend the exhibit's 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 Isla Kaiser Neivert, the late mother of Peter Neivert, who works at Brown in its geological sciences department.

"To have Sala's daughter come and speak was exciting. But I felt we should build a bigger umbrella," Pennell explains.

And to both exhibits an original biographical play about three Rhode Island women has been added. Two of the women, sisters, fled the Nazis as children and settled in Rhode Island. One of the sisters settled with the family of the third woman featured in the play, which is titled *Trust in the Journey: Becoming a Family — Marie, Jeannette and Ruth.*

The one-act, 35-minute play is written by Frank Toti, a history instructor at Rhode Island College who's also a graduate student in its theater department. Last month he traveled to Clearwater, Fla., to interview the two sisters, Marie Silverman and Jeannette Bornstein.

"I asked their forgiveness to ask them to tear their hearts again and to relive very painful memories and experiences. Then I asked for their blessing that I could share and honor their story with others."

The story of Silverman and Bornstein, who began their lives in Antwerp, Belgium, is not of Nazi death camps or labor camps, though it could have been had they not escaped. But they didn't escape unscathed. Their father died and they were separated from their mother for five years.

Their plight began when Bornstein was 5 and Silverman 9. The Nazis had invaded their country, and the family fled. They went to France, where they lived for about four years, mostly in hiding, largely in farmers' root cellars. But the Nazis found them and separated the girls and their mother from their father, who died in custody.

For nine months the girls lived with their mother in a detention camp on the Spanish border.

"Marie called it the Little Hell before the Big Hell," Toti says.

Detention camp prisoners eventually became labor camp workers or death camp victims. The girls' mother knew this and befriended Nazi resistors who dug beneath the detention camp's fence one night and freed the girls and their mother, although only briefly in her case. Once her daughters were safe in the hands of the resistors, she returned to the camp and crawled back under the fence.

Guards conducted daily counts of the adults, not the children. If the girls' mother was there to be counted, she could buy her children more time to escape.

"I can't grasp what that must have been like to bring your daughters to safety and then you go back to hell," Toti says. "It's more than bravery and courage."

The girls traveled by night and slept during the day. They crossed the Pyrenees Mountain into Spain and then sailed to America.

"The girls owed their lives to people whose names they never knew who put their own lives at risk to help them."

The girls came to this country by arrangement of the U.S. Committee for the Care of the European Children. They became the war's first refugee children to settle in Rhode Island. Bornstein settled with a family in Providence, Silverman t Providence — the family of Ruth Goldstein. And every weekend the girls got together, until almost five years later when the sisters were reunited with their mother and moved to New York.

Each of the three women has told her story through the Holocaust Education & Resource Center of Rhode Island. Now, through this play, they're telling them together.

"They are compelling because it's them," Toti says. "As I wrote the play, I wanted the audience to know this is a real story."

On March 29 at 2 p.m. the play about the women premieres at URI. And Silverman, Bornstein and Goldstein will be there, though not as performers. Actors will fill in for them at that time and place, and Toti hopes, many others.

"Marie, Jeannette and Ruth have been telling this story. The idea is how we allow their stories to live on after them."

The enduring idea behind all things Holocaust is remembrance. Those who lived through the horror and hardship are aging and dying.

"So now we have second-generation people," says Peter Neivert. "And there are many who don't know a lot about their parents' stories."

Neivert has memorialized his mother's story in the exhibit "My Mother's Story." It is centered on the Kindertransport, an arrangementby which the Nazis allowed Jewish German children to leave the country.

NYT / MICHELLE V. AGINS

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

"It was hard to say what their motivation was," Neivert says. "It was something instituted by England when they saw what was happening. There was some pressure to do something about the plight of the refugees in Germany. Apparently the Nazis said they would allow 10,000 children to leave. How many did leave I don't know."

Neivert just knows that his mother left, and just barely. The age limit for children eligible for the program was 16. Nievert's mother was 15. She went to England, and it might seem she had it easy.

"I suppose you could say she was fortunate," Neivert says. "But many Kindertransport children never saw their parents again. They were killed."

Neivert's grandfather was killed in a concentration camp. Like many Jews in Germany, he loved his country but stayed too long.

"He didn't want to leave Germany. By the time he realized he had to, it was too late. That was the situation with a lot of people."

Meanwhile Neivert's grandmother "lived pretty much above ground" with forged papers. And for about five years Neivert's mother was separated from her mother.

While the Kindertransport saved lives, it ruined relationships. Children grew up away from their parents and became attached to others.

"Very often the meeting of the Kindertransport children with their parents was not that great. They had taken different paths. I'm under the impression my mother did not run into the arms of her mother."

Neivert's grandmother had remarried and settled in New York with her long-separated daughter. Years later, when Neivert was a boy, he visited his grandmother's house in the Catskills, played hide-and-seek with his brother and discovered letters and photos from World War II.

"My grandmother told me who the people were and how the people were connected."

After Neivert's grandmother's death, Neivert's mother took possession of the materials, and Neivert's curiosity increased.

"I would have to draw information out of her. My mother and my grandmother didn't like talking about it. There were a lot of painful memories."

And there were a lot of letters that didn't last. Neivert's mother burned some of them.

"Maybe she knew I was getting interested in the family history. I think she just saw them as very personal."

Among the artifacts Neivert has are his mother's birth certificate, and the Nazis' amendment to it, calling her Sara, as they did all Jewish women. All Jewish men were called Israel.

Neivert's exhibit also includes family letters, and consequently, Nazi record keeping.

"People knew their letters were being read."

A government stamp on letters made this clear.

"The Germans were very official about everything. They did not do things surreptitiously. They established legal groundwork for everything."

Neivert's exhibit is not a sweeping look into Nazi Germany, but rather a personal look at one person's experience as a result of it. And Neivert wants you to see what he sees.

"I am an eyewitness vicariously through my mother's experience."

The exhibits are free and open to the public tomorrow through April 30 at the Providence campus of URI, 80 Washington St. The hours are Mondays through Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Fridays and Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call (401) 277-5206.

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