



N.Y.P.L., Dorot Jewish Division/Sala Garnarcz Collection

'LETTERS TO SALA: A YOUNG WOMAN'S LIFE IN NAZI LABOR CAMPS'

It didn't seem so at the time, but Sala Garnarcz was one of the lucky ones. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, she was a 16-year-old Jewish girl living in Sosnowiec, a town close to the German border. She volunteered to take the place of her older sister, Raizel, who had been ordered to report to a Nazi forced labor camp for six weeks. But the six weeks stretched into almost five years of servitude for Sala, in seven different camps, with a pittance for wages or none at all, filthy quarters and an abundance of typhus-carrying lice. Her luck was that her labor-worthiness as a seamstress saved her from Auschwitz, a main extermination center, where her parents and other family members died. The story of Sala (she is alive and well at 82 and has grandchildren with her husband of 60 years, Sidney Kirschner) is told in a stirring new exhibition at the New York Public Library, which draws on more than 300 cherished letters from family and friends; photographs (above, Sala, from 1945); and a diary that she managed to squirrel away during her years of servitude (for a while the Nazis let forced laborers send and receive mail, provided it was written in German). Crucial elements of her saga — which she kept under wraps for more than 50 years — include the protective support of an older campmate, Ala Gertner, later hanged at Auschwitz for her part in an uprising there; the kindness of a local German family to whose home she was sent under guard to use its sewing machine; her close comradeship with female workers at the various camps; her introduction to her husband, then a G.I., at a Rosh Hashana service after the camps were liberated; her postwar discovery of her two surviving sisters; and her emigration as a war bride to the United States in 1946. (Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Gallery, first floor, New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, (212) 869-8089, through June 17.)

GRACE GLUECK