



Author shares her mother's story during Omaha's Yom HaShoah commemoration

by LISA LIEB

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Ann Kirschner has captivated The New York Times, People Magazine, Jewish Book World and countless readers with *Sala's Gift*, the riveting tale of her mother's Holocaust experience. On Wednesday, April 18, 7 p.m., at Temple Israel, she will share her story during the Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) community event.

Sala's Gift is the story of a brave teenager who went to a labor camp in place of her delicate sister. What was supposed to be a six-week shift turned into five years of labor at seven different camps.

Sala risked her life to keep the letters she received, hiding them during lineups, handing them to trusted friends, even burying them underground. When Sala presented the hundreds of letters and postcards she had saved to Kirschner just before undergoing triple-bypass surgery, Kirschner's decade-long journey into her mother's past began. "Saving the letters was her act of resistance," Kirschner said. "What an act of heroism! This was her way of saying 'I define who I am, not you'."

Kirschner is University Dean of the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York. She began her career as a lecturer in Victorian literature at Princeton University, where she had earned a Ph.D. in English. A writer and contributor to a variety of newspapers and other publications, she has built a career as an entrepreneur in media and technology.

Kirschner views Yom Hashoah as an essential annual event. "As Jews and citizens of the 21st century, Yom Hashoah provides the forum to gather as a community and think of the tragedy of war, and the incredible importance of compassion and corrective action."

Her focus will center on how identity is shaped by history, and what happens when family history gets played out on a global stage. "We read in textbooks about events in history, yet we rarely get a chance to see what happens on the level of the individual. This is a call to action to use history in a productive way, and to take our place as contemporary citizens who care about the people around us."



Ann Kirschner

Asked about how her mother's letters and the enormous undertaking of writing *Sala's Gift* has changed her perception of the Holocaust, she replied that the experience has brought it down to a more personal level. "I don't think any of us can begin to imagine what it's like for the actual survivors, but these letters are perfectly preserved time capsules," she explained. "I hear their voices now. I hear them when I'm awake and I hear them when I'm asleep."

With her husband's first cousin, Jeffrey Schweid an Omaha resident, Kirschner is especially looking forward to her first Omaha trip. "I've always heard about the Omaha Jewish community, and I'm blown away by its vitality and range of activities," she said.

Prior to the community event, Kirschner will speak to Omaha area Jewish teens, focusing on selected letters from her mother's collection. "I particularly love talking to young people," Kirschner said. "They learn about a fellow young person coming of age, and they marvel at how my mother navigated this incredibly hostile world."

The teen educational program will begin with dinner at Temple at 6 p.m. and will conclude at 6:45 p.m. An author event and book signing will take place the following day, April 19, noon, at the JCC Kripke Library.

The Yom Hashoah commemoration is presented by the Center for Jewish Education and sponsored by Beth El, Beth Israel, and Temple Israel. Bea Karp and Nancy Kutler are co-chairmen of the committee, which also includes Toba Cohen, Katherine Finnegan, Beth Seldin-Dotan, Rosie Zweiback, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, and Zohar Weiner.

Kirschner encourages parents to bring their children on April 18th, stating that "the children are our most important audience." Questions about the Yom Hashoah community event may be directed to the CJE office at 334.6445.