

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

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SECTION E

## Holocaust tale tumbles from letters

By Barbara Yost

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

What Ann Kirschner didn't know about her mother could fill a book.

Now it has.

When Sala Kirschner went in for bypass surgery in 1991, her daughter Ann knew only that the Polish woman had survived the Holocaust and had been in a "camp." Growing up, Ann knew she should never ask questions about the nature of that camp or what had happened to Sala's family. One word and a cloud of sadness and horror would pass over Sala's eyes.

But when Sala faced major surgery at age 67, she called



her middle child into her room and brought out a box. "These are my letters from camp," she said. Letters that speak of life in seven Nazi work camps form the basis of *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (Free Press, 2006, \$26, hardcover) Ann, a historian, will discuss the book at the Arizona State University's Hayden Library at 7 p.m. Thursday.

As Ann read the letters, most of them in German, her mother's secret unfolded. In

1940, 16-year-old Sala Garn-carz, a Jew, went to work at a labor camp, one of several employing virtual slaves supplied by Jewish leaders.

Her ailing older sister Rai-zel had been assigned to the camp, but Sala volunteered to take her place. Between 1940 and 1945, Sala survived with a personality that captivated even her German guards and thanks to the kindness of people who helped her, including one German family.

"She had a lot of good angels along the way," Ann said. "She was an appealing person."

Sala's most treasured pos-

### Meet the author

**What:** Author Ann Kirschner discusses her book, *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story*.

**When:** 7 p.m. Thursday.

**Where:** Arizona State University's Hayden Library, Room C6 East, in Tempe.

**Details:** Free. (480) 965-6164.

Kirschner also will attend Tucson's Invisible Theatre world premiere of a play based on her book.

**What:** *Letters to Sala*.

**When:** Premiere at 7:30 to-night. The play runs through April 8.

**Where:** 1400 N. First Ave., Tucson.

**Details:** invisibletheatre.com or 1-(520)-882-9721. Tickets are \$22 to \$25.

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## Excerpt from 'Holocaust Story'

My mother had a secret. I knew that Sala Garncarz was born in Poland, the youngest of eleven children, and that she had survived a Nazi camp. I knew the names of my grandparents. I had one living aunt, but I didn't know anything about the rest of our once large family, not even their names.

In rare moments of retrospection, my mother would tell us about her arrival in the United States as the war bride of a handsome American soldier, ready to build a new life. I liked hearing her tale, especially since my brothers and I had starring roles. But even as a child, I was unconvinced. My mother was substituting a happy ending for an untold story. So fast, so complete a transformation from Sala, the survivor, to Sala, the happy American housewife and mother, seemed impossible. It was as if she had been snatched by extraterrestrials in 1939, and set down in New York in 1946.

Where did the old Sala go? What happened in the camp? Why didn't she have a number tattooed on her arm?

I had no one to ask. I never broached the subject with my brothers or my father. My mother's silence seemed to swallow up questions before they could be spoken aloud. When could someone else — a new

friend, a careless relative — wandered into the forbidden territory of Sala's years during the war, she turned her face away as if she had been slapped. Not all survivors refused to speak, I knew, and not all children were eager to listen. I had friends whose parents wouldn't stop talking about the past. Enough already, my friends would say, we're tired of playing Anne Frank.

I studied the faces in the old black-and-white photographs that stood like silent sentinels on her dresser. My favorite was a striking portrait of young Sala in profile, gazing intently at an older woman: "My friend Ala Gertner," my mother told me. She offered no details. Where did they meet?

What happened to Ala Gertner? Sala, with her thick, glossy hair pulled back from her face and cascading down her back, her sharp cheekbones catching the light, looked like an irresistible ingenue from my favorite old movies with Katherine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, Moira Shearer, Irene Dunne. Ala was not nearly as pretty, but there was something bold and sophisticated in the tilt of her hat and something hypnotic in the way her eyes locked with my mother's.

Of course, despite her best efforts, Sala could never build an impermeable wall between our present

— From *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (Free Press, 2006, \$26)

## Letters reveal mom's past

### HOLOCAUST Continued from E1

session was the satchel of letters sent by dozens of family members, including Raizel. Sala protected the letters, hiding them under her clothing, carrying them from camp to camp, once even burying them to keep them safe.

At the end of the war, Sala met Sidney Kirschner, a young American soldier who married her and brought her to the United States.

"She was encouraged to put it (the past) away and go on with the new," said Ann, university dean of the Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York.

The letters remained Sala's hidden link to the past. From time to time, she would take them from their box, touch them, read them.

"It was always done in private," Ann said. "She believed she was shielding her children from her painful past."

Then Sala, not 5 feet tall and just 83 pounds, needed a bypass. Fearing she wouldn't survive, she decided to share her secret with Ann, her bookish child, the one she knew would grasp the meaning of those letters. They looked at them together, Sala trying to remember enough of her first language to read the ones in Polish.

Ann could read some German, but deciphering the old script in the more than 350 letters and postcards was challenging. She hired a translator to be sure not a word was lost as the story of a brave young woman

emerged. "I gasped that I was reading letters to my mother," she said.

Ann was being introduced to a stranger, a young girl who lived by wit and charm. "It was like time travel," she said.

What Ann learned about that young girl went far in explaining the grown woman.

"It deepened our relationship. It gave me an appreciation for her heroism," she said. "Preserving these letters was an act of resistance" as discovery of the letters could have spelled death for Sala.

Ann also came to understand why people were always drawn to Sala's warmth. Unlike some Holocaust survivors, whose concentration camp experiences extinguished the light in their eyes, "my mother is a joyous person. She goes into life with a full heart," Ann said.

In 1994, Ann and her brother Joey traveled to Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic to retrace their mother's past, finding the locations where the labor camps stood.

"It was difficult to find them," she said. "They were unmarked."

With that trip, Sala's life came full circle.

Today Sala and Sidney live not far from Ann and her family. Raizel, who had come to America in 1947, died in 2002. Except for another sister, the rest of their family perished in concentration camps during the war. Sala's parents died at Auschwitz.

When Ann finished her manuscript, Sala was the first to read it. Reliving the memories, "she didn't sleep at night," Ann said. Yet, "I think she liked the book."

Some secrets remain. Ann will never ask Sala if there was physical abuse in the camps. She has learned that some secrets are worth keeping.

And some are not. When Sala shared her letters with her daughter, she thought little of their importance, Ann said. Who would want to read such things?

But the day the two of them climbed the marble steps of the New York Public Library to donate the letters to their permanent collection, the import became clear, Ann said.

"I saw the recognition that this was no longer my pet project, but that she had done something for the ages."

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