

The Columbus Dispatch

High 48 | Low 30
Details B8

WWW.DISPATCH.COM

HOME FINAL ■
50 CENTS

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2007

E2 ■

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH | Arts | SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2007

BREAKING NEWS: DISPATCH.COM

Q&A

Letters, girl's diary detail life in Nazi labor camp

By Bill Eichenberger
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Children want to know what their parents were like and what happened to them when they were young.

Ann Kirschner, who will appear Wednesday at the Jewish Community Center Bookfair, had to wait half a century to learn about some of the most critical years of her mother's life.

She knew that her mother, Sala, had been born in Poland, the youngest of 11 children, and that she had spent time in a Nazi labor camp. But Sala remained steadfastly silent about the details of her young-adult years.

Until one day in 1991, just before her mother underwent heart surgery, Sala

gave her daughter a red box full of letters she had received and the diary she kept during the almost six years she spent enslaved in seven labor camps in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The box led Kirschner to write and publish *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story*.

About 6 million European Jews died in death camps during World War II.

"The enormity of the numbers somehow makes their suffering less real, almost abstract," Kirschner wrote in an e-mail.

"That's why Sala's letters are so unique — deeply personal, individual, yet representative of the experience of those millions. The letters light up a pathway through history, a way for us to delve into the wartime catastrophe that we were spared, yet we seek to understand."

Q: You write about how dismissive some death-camp survivors and others can be about the Jews used as slaves in the labor camps. The implication: that the slaves had it "easy."



Ann Kirschner and her mother, Sala Garnarcz Kirschner, 83



A page from Sala's wartime mail

A: We should not be made to decide "who suffered most." Any comparison is dangerous because it puts us in the impossible, unforgivable position of taking the measurement of a person's suffering — and declaring that

► Ann Kirschner will appear at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, and the exhibit "Letters to Sala — A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps" — a collection of photographs, letters and journals — will continue through Nov. 30 in the Jewish Community Center, 1125 College Ave. The lobby is open from 5:45 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 5:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays, 1:30 to 6 p.m. Saturdays and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays. For more information, call 614-231-2731.

it comes up short.

We must honor the survivors' experiences, whether they were hidden children, partisans or camp inmates. From the comfort of our living rooms, how can we possibly find one a more "real survivor" than another?

Q: What did you feel as you read your mother's words and witnessed, in a way, her attempt to make sense of a world gone mad?

A: I was struck by my mother's eloquence. Her diary, and the wartime poetry, are beautiful — though she never

thinks of herself as a talented writer. Sala always admired (her sister) Raizel's writing and considered her to be the family author. But I think about my mother's writing with tremendous admiration.

I also think about how much I've learned from her about the power of words — it was the words of the letters that nourished her hungry and homeless spirit, words that sustained her desire to live. And words that today provide the incontrovertible proof of the lives that were lost.

Q: Ala Gertner befriended your mother and protected her at the Geppersdorf labor camp.

A: Ala was, and is, my muse. I grew up with (a) haunting photograph of Ala and my mother, but I knew nothing about her. I never knew that she had appeared like a fairy godmother to help my mother on the day that they were both deported; that she was a thoroughly modern woman who was teacher, sister, friend to Sala; that she was instrumental in the only armed uprising at Auschwitz.

Q: Your mother needed to suppress her memories in order to start a new life. She didn't marry another survivor. You say this was an act of hope.

A: For all the survivors, having any faith in the future was an act of hope. After what they had been through, they had no idea if they could have children, rebuild their lives — but they were still young, the ones who survived the camps — most of them in their early 20s. Hope came roaring back.

They married quickly, had children, got jobs, started businesses, settled into new places to live. Were there nightmares? Of course there were.

This was an era where psychiatric care was hardly the norm — post-traumatic stress disorder hadn't yet been identified, but surely this was a population that suffered deeply from it, and suffers from it today.

beichenberger@dispatch.com