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Gift of letters and life

Holocaust display

SALA KIRSCHNER kept more than herself alive as a teen in Nazi slave-labor camps — she preserved the precious letters and photographs that gave her a lifeline from hell.

BY JORDAN LITE
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Hidden first from the prying eyes of SS guards, then from the family she raised in Queens after marrying an American G.I., the historic trove is now on display at the New York Public Library.

"All along, I watched it [the mail] and guarded it like the eyes in my head, since it was my greatest treasure," Kirschner, now 82, wrote to her sister after the war ended.

Through seven slave labor camps, Kirschner hid the letters family and friends sent from home. She buried them, passed them to friends, and tucked them in the folds of her clothes during the Nazis' notorious roll calls.

For nearly 50 years, she told no one — not her husband, Sidney, nor their three children — of how she had defied her captors by saving the mail, which prisoners could receive but not keep.

The papers remained Kirschner's secret, hidden away in a closet in her modest, two-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights.

Only when she was alone did the homemaker take out the yellowing notes and fading photographs, which tell of boyfriends and holiday celebrations, and the ominous march toward the Polish ghettos and deportation.

"There are individual letters, but no other collection of letters we know of that has been saved by someone in the camps," said Michael Terry, chief of the library's Dorot Jewish Division. "The importance of them as a lifeline to Sala gives them emotional power and significance."

Kirschner never suspected that her treasure would be precious to anyone else. She knew only that it sustained her from the time she was taken from her home in Sosnowiec, Poland, as a 16-year-old, in 1940 until she was liberated five years later. Only two of her 10 siblings survived the Holocaust.

And years later, when Kirschner read the letters, her loved ones came to life.

"When I felt lonely, I would take out a postcard, and I felt like I'm being with my family or with my friends," Kirschner, who now lives in Monsey, N.Y., and in Florida, said softly in accented English. "They still served a certain

purpose for me, but not to discuss it with my family, because I didn't want them to feel burdened with my past."

For daughter Ann, the missing chapter of her mother's life was "a black hole of memory."

Everything changed for the family one summer afternoon on Fire Island, days before Kirschner was to undergo heart surgery. Fearful that the letters would be lost if she didn't survive, she spread the Hitler-stamped papers before Ann on a picnic table.

"What do you want to know?" Kirschner asked.

"It was a very sacred moment," said Ann, 53, who shares her mother's bright blue eyes. "It was electrifying."

Ann, a media consultant and writer from Manhattan, spent the next 15 years getting the letters, in German, Yiddish and Polish, translated — and figuring out how to make them public.

Kirschner is still getting used to the idea of sharing the mail she held on to so dearly for so long.

"It's very hard on me, because I feel like I'm naked for the world, but I got convinced that it's very important," she said.

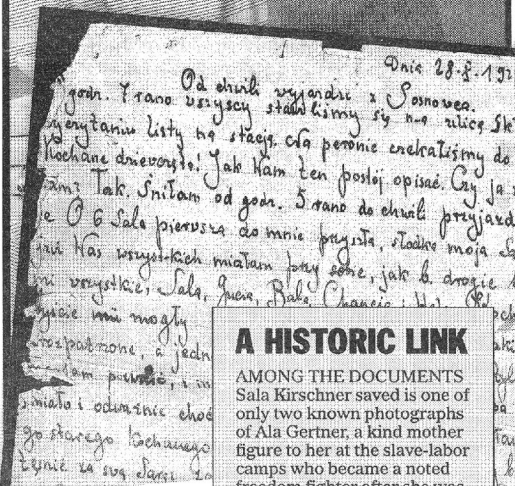
"Letters to Sala" is on view at the New York Public Library, Fifth Ave. and 42nd St., through June 17. Admission is free.

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Kirschner with daughter Ann, who got letters like one below translated from German & Yiddish.



SUSAN WATTS/DAILY NEWS



A HISTORIC LINK

AMONG THE DOCUMENTS Sala Kirschner saved is one of only two known photographs of Ala Gertner, a kind mother figure to her at the slave-labor camps who became a noted freedom fighter after she was sent to Auschwitz.

Gertner was one of four women who was publicly hanged at the death camp after prisoners blew up a crematorium in the only known instance of armed rebellion there. She'd smuggled gunpowder that was used to build the bomb, and was executed 12 days before Auschwitz was liberated.

"There is no other documentation of her, no writings from her," said the library's Michael Terry. "To run into someone who was a personal savior and converged to a more historic level is sort of remarkable."

Jordan Lite



Ala Gertner

Sala Kirschner