

Lilith

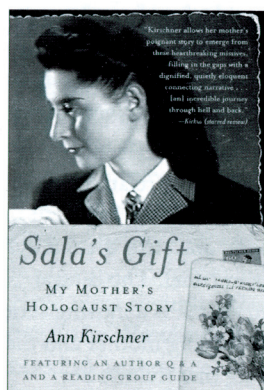
independent, Jewish & frankly feminist

WINTER 2006-07

Letters Hoarded for a Lifetime

Ann Kirschner takes us into a world of determination and resilience in *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (Free Press, \$26). Her mother, Sala Garncarz, survived five years in seven different labor camps, and managed to save a cache of letters and postcards written by 80 different people. These letters form the basis for this magnificent account.

Such precious documents lend an immediacy and power to Ann Kirschner's book, making it unique among personal accounts of survival. Kirschner writes: "Sala's letters are drops of time, spontaneous outpourings rendered with the shapelessness of real life, their emotions raw and unfiltered." The author fills in the political and historical background to the little-known Nazi enslavement of those young Jewish men and women who were sent to the Polish region of Eastern Upper Silesia, adjoining Germany, to work in factories or construction projects belonging to German industrialists. The work was grueling and the conditions unimaginable; nonetheless, unlike in the concentration camps, a percentage of these Jews were permitted to remain alive as long as they could continue to work. They were even allowed to write and receive a limited amount of censored mail.



Sala's large, Orthodox family lived in a one-room apartment in the town of Sosnowiec, home to 28,000 Jews. They write to Sala of their hunger and their hope despite the deteriorating conditions. On March 28, 1942, Sala's sister Raizel writes: "We haven't sent you any matzos...but we're not going to have any matzos either.... Remember, don't worry, everything is fine with us ...we talk about having Yom Kippur on Passover. Remember, don't cry, don't cry!" Later her sister Laya Dina writes of the last mass deportation. The word "wedding" serves as a code word for a roundup. "August 28, 1942. To begin with, I want you to know that my husband, David, and all of the children are home. It's been such a wedding: everyone has been ordered to go, small, grey, old and young, the poor and the rich...."

We follow Sala through camp after camp, where we get to know her friends and protectors, including the American soldier who pledges his love to her. Sala marries this man and comes to the United States in 1946. She never speaks of her wartime life until 1991, when she hands a shoe box filled with mementos to her daughter and begins, finally, to talk.

Sala's story, filled with love and hope, was also featured in "Sala's Letters," a widely-reviewed exhibition at the New York Public Library in the spring of 2006. With this book, Ann Kirschner and her mother Sala have given us a gift of historical value and deeply personal meaning.

Rachel Josefowitz Siegel co-edited Jewish Mothers Tell Their Stories, as well as two more anthologies written by contemporary Jewish women. She is a retired feminist psychotherapist.