Bringing One Woman’s Holocaust Experience to Life

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

Letters posed with Hitler stamps and okky Z’s for “enemies” or canceled. Tattered diary pages in Yiddish. The photograph of a young woman and her first love, peering from the sharpened diary “of a barracks. To those educated in the ways of the Holocaust, the most startling aspect of these documents is that they survived, and their bearer with them.

Now they are on view through June 17 at the New York Public Library, in the exhibition “Letters to Sala”: more than 100 postcards, letters, photographs and diary entries (out of a total of 300) that chronicle one woman’s experience of the nightmarish that unfolded to thousands of Jews from western Poland were transported to Nazi forced labor camps. They speak to the life of Sala Garnicz, who from the age of 14 to 21 worked in seven camps—and painstakingly saved every paper that passed through her hands. Encased in glass, the yellowed documents, their Yiddish, Polish and German script faded across 48 years, are redolent with frustration and longing. Each is labeled with a summary of its contents; about 30 letters are translated in full on electronic screens. Photographs of the Garnicz family in happier times hang on the walls.

Mrs. Garnicz, now Sala Garnicz Kirschen, and her daughter, Ann Kirschen, presented the letters to the library’s Door Jewish division in April 2006. They form a time capsule of extraordinary breadth from a less documented arm of the Nazi camp system, said David S. Ferrero, director of the research libraries.

Sala Garnicz Kirschen with her granddaughter Abby Kirschen at a public reading of her letters this week.

Michele V. Agnoli/The New York Times

A time capsule from the Nazi labor camps, carefully preserved.

"I could not stop looking at you mother, because I felt something inside of me tearing, hurting," Mrs. Kirschen wrote in her diary on Oct. 28, 1940. "One more kiss, one more hug, and my mother does not want to let go of me. Let it go already, it is torture."

It was then that she met Ala Gartner, the woman she would call her guardian angel. Older and more sophisticated, Ms. Gartner took the frightened teenager into her care as they journeyed to Geppersdorf, Germany, part of a network of 160 sites with 50,000 workers. The men in Geppersdorf built a branch of the autobahn, while the women did the chores to sustain them.

And the letters began to arrive, mostly from Raizel, who slowly mastered the German language required by censors. "When mother received your postcard, she was the happiest person in the world," Raizel wrote in November.

Less than a year later she told of the families’ deteriorating circumstances. “May God always look after you,” she wrote. It seemed, she said, as if “He has turned away from her.

There were small kindnesses. In Geppersdorf, Mrs. Kirschen worked as a seamstress in the home of a German family whose daughter once re-

parture date, Aug. 12, he failed to show. That day, her parents’ ghetto was raided. Her sisters were sent to labor camps, her parents gassed at Auschwitz. Ala Gartner was hanged there three years later for her role in an uprising.

Mrs. Kirschen spent 1944 and 1945 at Schatzlar in a remote corner of Czechoslovakia, forgotten but out of harm’s way. The letters stopped coming; now there were only the birthday cards sent within the barracks, written in Yiddish and decorated with images of forget-me-nots.

In 1945, shortly after her liberation by the Red Army on May 8, Mrs. Kirschen met her future husband. She arrived in New York in 1946, one of the first war brides.

“How many daughters get to know their mother as a brave and beautiful 16-year-old girl in the most extraordinary circumstances?” Mrs. Kirschen asked. "Every letter became a way of reassuring herself that she mattered somewhere in the world, which is why saving these letters became to exactly the same as saving herself. If these letters didn’t survive, she didn’t exist.”

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