"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition
New York: **Today,** mostly sunny, mild, high 64. **Tonight,** cloudy, a late shower, low 47. **Tomorrow,** cloudy, a shower, high 60. **Yesterday,** high 74, low 47. Weather map, Page D8.

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ONE DOLLAR

Postcards and a photograph from "Letters to Sala," at the New York Public Library.

New York Public Library, Dorot Jewish division/Sala Garncarz Collection

Bringing One Woman's Holocaust Experience to Life

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

Letters posted with Hitler stamps and inky Z's for "zensiert," or censored. Tattered diary pages in Yiddish. The photograph of a young woman and her first love, peeking from the darkened doorway 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 nightmare that unfolded as thousands of Jews from western Poland were transported to Nazi forced labor camps.

They speak to the life of Sala Garncarz, who from the age of 16 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 60 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 Garncarz family in happier times hang on the walls.

Ms. Garncarz, now Sala Garncarz Kirschner, and her daughter, Ann Kirschner, presented the letters to the library's Dorot Jewish division in April 2005. They form a time capsule of extraordinary breadth from a less documented arm of the Nazi camp system, said David S. Ferriero, director of the research libraries.

Ms. Kirschner hopes to pass on her mother's legacy. Her book, "Sala's Gift," is to be published by the Free Press in November, and a documentary and a play about Mrs. Kirschner are currently in development.

The letters tell of a past locked away by a young woman who hoped never to resurrect it, and of the eventual understanding between a mother and a daughter.

"These letters, I knew that I've got to have them," Mrs. Kirschner said in a telephone interview last Sunday, her 82nd birthday and 60th wedding anniversary. "They were a link to my home, to my friends, to my life, to everything. They helped me survive. These letters were my most precious thing."

So precious that she once buried them, and another time threw them under a building, to ensure their life. And then she tucked them and her memories away, sharing them with no one — not Sidney Kirschner, the American G.I. she eventually married, nor their children — until 1991, when, scheduled to undergo a triple bypass, she presented her daughter with a box.

"These are my letters from the war," she said.

"At that moment I thought only of one thing: I don't know if I'm going to survive the surgery, and I don't want to take them with me," Mrs. Kirschner recalled. "My children are adults now. They can handle it."

Her daughter said: "I think she was at first annoyed at my ignorance of what they were and who the people were and where she had been. It was almost as if she had forgotten her own years of silence."

Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Sala Garncarz Kirschner with her granddaughter Abby Kirschner at a public reading of her letters this week.

A literary scholar and media consultant, Ms. Kirschner spent the next 15 years unraveling her mother's story as she cataloged and deciphered the documents with the help of translators.

"When I first got them," she said, "it was if the letters were written to me, they were so fresh. I read the letters so often that I could recite them in my sleep."

Slowly, Ms. Kirschner unveiled a fearless young woman who, at 16, volunteered for what was to be a six-week stint at a forced labor camp in her sister's place. Though Raizel was two years older, it was Sala who was the bolder, scurrying through the night to scavenge food for her family, hiding in a tenement in Sosnowiec, near Krakow.

"What I was thinking at the time was that I have a better chance to go than my sister, who was very into religion, very timid," Mrs. Kirschner said. "I believed it was my destiny to go, and I wanted to go. They promised that if one member of the family went, the rest would be safe at home."

Her father, a Hebrew teacher who wore his beard long, blessed his daughter but did not see her off at the train. At the station, her mother wept and refused to release her.

"I could not stop looking at you mother, because I felt something inside of me tearing, hurting," Mrs. Kirschner 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 Gärtner, the woman she would call her guardian angel. Older and more sophisticated, Ms. Gärtner 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 here."

There were small kindnesses. In Geppersdorf, Mrs. Kirschner worked as a seamstress in the home of a German family whose daughter once removed the young woman's Jewish star and took her for a walk in the city. Later the family sent a package of food and clothing. It was delivered by their son, an SS officer in the camp.

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

In September 1941, Mrs. Kirschner was allowed a three-day furlough home. In the summer of 1942, she was offered a second visit by a guard she had befriended, but on the departure 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 Gärtner was hanged there three years later for her role in an uprising.

Mrs. Kirschner 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. Kirschner 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?" Ms. Kirschner asked. "Every letter became a way of reassuring herself that she mattered somewhere in the world, which is why saving these letters became to her exactly the same as saving herself. If these letters didn't survive, she didn't exist."