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THE VOICE OF SOUTH TEXAS SINCE 1865

Holocaust letters, photos on display at library

Woman's mother kept correspondences, diary when she was in Nazi slave labor camp for five years.

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It was 1991 and Ann Kirschner's mother was getting ready to go in for open-heart surgery. Sala Kirschner, with little in the way of fanfare or preamble, gave her daughter a box for a children's board game.

"I thought she was bringing me her jewelry for safekeeping," says Ann Kirschner in a telephone interview from New York. But when she opened the box, what she found was 350 letters, postcards and her mother's diary from the five years she spent in Nazi slave labor camps during World War II.

Sala Kirschner, who went on to become a war bride and moved to the U.S., had kept silent about her time in the camps for 50 years, wanting to spare her children from the painful memories of that time. But now here was a priceless cache of letters written to her from loved ones, friends and fellow campmates, letters she somehow kept from the Nazis as she moved



COURTESY PHOTO

In 1991, after 50 years, Sala Kirschner (left) revealed letters from her time in a Nazi labor camp to her daughter, Ann Kirschner.

through five different camps — hiding them from guards during line-ups, handing them off to friends, throwing them under a building, even burying them.

"Just the existence of the letters sent an electric shock through me,

looking at the handwriting of my aunt, my mother's close friends, a boyfriend whom I knew nothing about," says Ann Kirschner. "It was really a magical process because I felt the letters were being written to me, even though it was 50 years later."



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In 2005 the rare Holocaust documents were given to the New York Public Library's Dorot Jewish Division. A traveling exhibit using facsimiles of the letters and postcards, along with historical photographs, will be on display at San Antonio's Central Library today through Dec. 28. "Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps" offers a remarkable view of the human drama that unfolded in the Nazi labor camps, where Jewish victims were worked ceaselessly, often to their deaths.

Ann Kirschner, who has penned a book about her mother's story, "Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story" (Free Press Trade Paperback; \$14), will be on hand at the opening at 1 p.m. today, as will the exhibit's New York curator, former San Antonian Jill Vexler.

"Having insight into one woman's experience through these letters gives a whole door into that piece of World War II and the Holocaust story," says Vexler. "It's absolutely unheard of in the scholarship. A lot of people saved one or two letters, or maybe a hand-

See HOLOCAUST/OVER

Holocaust letters chronicle time in Nazi labor camp

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ful, but we've combed the Holocaust archive and no one managed to keep 350. It's just a staggering number."

In the exhibit the letters and postcards, all written in German, are given summary translations, says Vexler.

Sala Garnarcz was living with her family in Sosnowiec, an industrial city near Krakow, when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. She was just 16 years old when, in 1940, she was sent to Geppersdorf, a German forced-labor camp. She persuaded her parents to let her go in the place of her sister, Raizel, a timid, intellectual girl whom Sala feared wouldn't be able to make it in camp life. Her time in the camp was supposed to last only six weeks.

It stretched into five years. In a way, Sala was lucky: She was sent to a labor camp instead of a concentration camp, where Jews were summarily exterminated. Vexler says most people are mystified when they learn the Nazis allowed the prisoners to send and receive mail.

"The labor camps were managed by a high-ranking German officer who had been a successful businessman. What he basically said was, 'You guys might want a final solution — the elimination of every Jew on the planet — but what I need are workers.' He wanted to keep the morale of his workers up, so he allowed these letters to go back and forth."

The letters "bring history to life, through the eyes of one young girl," says Ann Kirschner, now the dean of Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York. "The letters and diary are a way for us to connect in a very emotional and personal way with events and facts that might otherwise just seem like dry textbook material." The diary is especially dear to her, she adds, because she gets to experience her mother "firsthand."

"Since all the people she wrote to were killed, we don't have any of her letters. So you're only hearing one half of the conversation. In the diary, here is my 16-year-old mother saying goodbye to her mother and father and being ripped away from everything that was familiar to her."

The cache also includes letters Sala received from fellow



COURTESY PHOTO

In 1940, Sala Kirschner was sent to a German forced-labor camp.

campmates, including Ala Gertner, one of four women who were hanged for participation in an uprising at Auschwitz four weeks before it was liberated.

"The more you come to learn about this woman through the letters, the more you feel the courage of the everyday heroism of people who risked their lives to save others," says Ann Kirschner. "In 2008 there are plenty of opportunities for moral courage, and I think the letters are a call to summon this courage. They are highly relevant."

Sala's family, including her beloved sister, were sent to Auschwitz in 1942, where they were likely gassed on arrival. Not long after her liberation in 1945, Sala married American GI Sidney Kirschner.

The traveling exhibit has been in 10 venues in the United States and has also traveled to Poland. In the spring it will journey to Germany. Vexler says more than 27,000 people came to see the exhibit in New York in four months, an astounding attendance.

San Antonio Library Director Ramiro S. Salazar says he

is thrilled that the traveling exhibit has landed here.

"The library is proud to offer this moving exhibit which tells the story of one of the most difficult eras in the world's history from the personal point of view of an individual swept up in events almost unbelievable to us today," he says.

The local exhibit is made possible by the Dalkowitz Foundation, the San Antonio Public Library Foundation and the San Antonio Public Library.

Ann Kirschner, whose book has been translated into several languages, says she gets letters and e-mails every week from people who say they have been touched by her mother's odyssey. Sala is now 84; her husband is 86.

"Again and again people

want to say thank you for my mother's courage in saving these letters, for reminding us about the importance of moral fortitude, the importance of friendship and family, which is

what kept her strong," she says. "My mother is always amazed that people are drawn to her story, that something so private and personal has resonance for so many people."