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Sala's gift, an inspiring tale of faith and survival during Holocaust

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BY GRACIE BONDS STAPLES- THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

The letters and photographs were kept out of sight for years but never far from Sala Kirschner's mind.

They sustained her through days so horrifying she kept them secret for nearly five decades.



Ann Kirschner with her mother and Holocaust survivor Sala Garncarz Kirschner, the subject of the exhibition "Letters to Sala: A Young ... Read More

Then in the summer of 1991, she took them from a box in her bedroom closet and handed them to her daughter, Ann. The revelation ultimately led to a book, exhibit and a play scheduled to open here soon, giving metro Atlantans a glimpse into Sala's world.

Until that day in 1991, Ann Kirschner said she knew almost nothing of her mother's past even though it was the place she'd most wanted to visit.

"I knew that she was the youngest of 11 children and that she was born in the city of Sosnowiec, Poland," she said. "And I knew that she had been in a Nazi camp."



There, hidden in the brittle paper and fading photographs were the details that finally

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Holocaust survivor Sala Garncaz Kirschner is the subject of the exhibition "Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor ... [Read More](#)

breathed life not just into her mother but Sala's friends and siblings, most of whom didn't survive the Nazis' reign of terror.

Reading them, Kirschner said, was how she'd imagined being hit by lightning.

"It was illuminating in a way that was brilliant, risky and unforgettable," she said.

Now with the Passover season drawing nigh, that's how she hopes

the rest of us will feel having read the book "Sala's Gift" about her mother, and having witnessed the play and exhibition over the coming weeks – illuminated.

All of it reminds her of the exhortation in the traditional text Haggadah "to be as if you were the first to come from Egypt."

"Every time I talk to a reporter or a reader of 'Sala's Gift' or someone who saw the play, it is new and fresh," Kirschner said. "It's as if I am telling the story for the first time."

"Letters to Sala: A Young Woman's Life in Nazi Labor Camps" is opening Sunday and will run through May 28 at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta's Katz Family Mainstreet Gallery in Dunwoody. A play, "Letters to Sala," opens April 23 at the center.

"We hope people in Atlanta will put themselves in the position of a teenager alone, at risk of losing her friends, family, language and life, with only these flimsy pieces of paper to ground her in the only reality she understands," Kirschner said. "They will ask themselves the question, where do we find the courage to live through chaos and uncertainty?"

Telling her mother's story

Kirschner found the answers to those questions in the letters and photos her mother, now 90, gave her that hot July day in 1991.

For Sala, she said, it was friendship and love that rescued her.

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Two years after Sala handed those letters to her, Ann Kirschner said the idea to tell her mother's story came to her.

She wrote a first draft, but after a long list of rejections from publishers, she put the idea aside and then death visited her family once again.

"My aunt, who was my mother's principal correspondent, died," Kirschner said.

It was 2002. Maybe she should finish the work she began.

Instead of writing, though, Kirschner, now dean of Macaulay Honors College in Manhattan, said she focused her attention on finding a final home for the letters, written mostly in German, other times in Yiddish and Polish. She donated them to the New York Public Library and began planning an exhibition.

Soon thereafter she met Arlene Hutton, a New York playwright, and the two of them began working on a play.

"Then, when I least expected it, some of the publicity around the exhibition led to an agent and then a book contract," Kirschner said.

Research for the book had long been completed, but Kirschner added more recent discoveries and eventually a completely new book was done. That was in 2005.

On March 5, 2006, the exhibit, which would eventually travel all over the world, opened at the New York Public Library. "Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story" was published in November 2006.

"My mother and I could never have anticipated that the book would have the impact that it has had," Kirschner said. "My mother is always particularly enthralled by the Chinese edition: that there are Mandarin readers of her letters strikes her as improbable – and so wonderful."

Absorbing the experience

Perhaps most surprising to both mother and daughter is that their treasure would be of interest to anyone.

Through seven slave camps, Sala hid the letters, revelations of boyfriends and celebrations, the mad march toward Polish ghettos and deportation, and courage and survival and faith.

But why tell the story in three different forms?

"Some people will respond to a book read in solitude, others to an exhibition experienced in the company of other people, while others will be touched most by the live performance of actors," Kirschner said.

All three moved Robert Egizio, artistic director of Stage Door Players. The prospect of producing the play was particularly exciting, Egizio said, but the exhibition was more than the theater could accommodate.

He contacted Kim Goodfriend, manager of special projects and the Katz gallery at Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. She agreed that bringing them both to Atlanta would be huge.

“The first year we wanted to present it, our schedules just didn’t gel,” Egizio said. “Fast-forward a year, and here we are.”

Goodfriend said the exhibition includes Sala’s most significant letters, an explanation of the place and time, a map of the camps, dairy pages and photographs.

“These letters,” she said, “serve as an amazing eyewitness account of what was going on in the world.”

EVENT PREVIEW

The play: “Letters to Sala”

8 p.m. April 23, 24 and 26; noon April 25; 2 p.m. April 27. \$12-\$27. Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. 678-812-4078, www.atlantajcc.org.

The exhibition: “Letters to Sala: A Young Woman’s Life in Nazi Labor Camps”

5:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 5:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays; 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays; 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Sundays. April 6-May 28. Free admission. Katz Family Mainstreet Gallery at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. 678-812-4078, www.atlantajcc.org. (Please check atlantajcc.org for Passover holiday hours.)

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