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A Mother's Gift: Hidden Letters From the Holocaust

By GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

When you're the child of Holocaust survivors, you understand: Childhood stories from your parents don't come easily. You tread gingerly with questions about their past, knowing that any memories you manage to enkindle are entwined with the pain of loss. You accept that most of the horrible things they saw, and endured, they will never share with you.

Ann G. Kirschner spent most of her life treading gingerly. She knew her mother, born Sala Garncarz, had been living with her family in Sosnowitz, Poland, when the Germans invaded in 1939.

She knew Sala had survived the war as a prison worker in a series of labor camps, but which ones, she never learned.

She knew her mother's parents, devout Jews, had been killed at Auschwitz and that eight of Sala's 10 siblings -- some of whose names Ann didn't know -- had died as well, most of them in concentration camps.

Her mother had told her some stories. But not many. And not often.

"My mother could not have created more of a thirst for this if she tried," says Ms. Kirschner, who became known to many in higher education a few years ago as the director of Columbia University's ambitious but short-lived online educational venture, Fathom.

"She made me hungry for it."

And then in 1992, Sala presented her daughter with a package that would help to satisfy that hunger.

Preparing to go in for heart surgery, Sala brought Ann an old Spill and Spell box that Ann and her two brothers had played with as children in Queens, N.Y. From it, Sala pulled a worn leather pouch the size of a lady's evening bag, and handed it to her daughter. It was crammed with yellowed letters and postcards -- 297 of them.

"These are my papers, my letters from the war," Sala told her daughter.

The letters, mostly in German (a few slipped through written in Polish, despite the Nazi rules against correspondence in Polish or Yiddish), were written to Sala during the five years she was imprisoned in Nazi labor camps.

Her older sister Raizel, whose place Sala, then 16, took when the Nazis ordered a Gancarz daughter to report for work, wrote 99 of them. Most are stamped with the "Z" of the Nazi censors, and a few bear postage stamps with a picture of Adolf Hitler.

Raizel wrote florid letters, full of assurances that Sala's family loved and missed her.

But her letters also hint at the food shortages and other privations in Sosnowitz, as the Nazis, over time, deported the town's entire Jewish population of more than 50,000 to labor and concentration camps. "There was a big wedding here to which I wasn't invited," Raizel writes in one, in March 1941. The family had never worked out a code, but Sala knew that "wedding" meant a transport to the camps.

In another, postmarked Neusalz, August 25, 1942, Raizel indicates to Sala that she too has been deported to a labor camp, and separated from their parents: "Dear Sala, I'm sure you're wondering where we took this address in Neusalz, but that's for real. ... Don't worry about us. But we're worried about you, and our dear, precious, precious parents. We don't know what happened to them." Raizel survived. She died in 2002.

Sala had also saved some 18 letters written to her by Ala Gartner, a fellow deportee from Sosnowitz who became her surrogate big sister during their internment together in the early part of the war. Ala Gartner would later return to Sosnowitz, only to be deported to Auschwitz and, eventually, play a crucial role in the 1944 prisoner uprising there, smuggling gunpowder to prisoners who blew up a crematorium.

Sala had kept the letters to herself for 50 years.

"They were in a closet in Queens; they were in a closet in Monsey," says Ms. Kirschner, referring to the places in New York where her parents had lived. "I don't think she ever touched them."

Life offers just a few chances to change direction, she says, and "I knew this was one for me. I knew she had given me this extraordinary gift."

Sala's gift will soon be on view to the world. Through her daughter's efforts, the letters will become the basis of a "Letters to Sala" exhibit planned for the Yeshiva University Museum's Center for Jewish History. The museum hopes to mount the show early in 2005. Ms. Kirschner also intends to donate the originals to a scholarly archive or library.

As Sala's daughter, Ann Kirschner says she felt a sense of sacredness about her mother's letters. "She protected these letters with her life."

But with her training as an academic -- she earned a Ph.D. in Victorian literature from

Princeton University in the late 1970s and had worked summers as an archivist -- she understood instinctively that the letters should be made public, and that the time had come for the daughter to learn and tell her mother's story.

Much of that learning took place in 1993, when she and her mother, recovered from surgery, traveled to Poland and Germany to retrace the stops of Sala's youth, including the place where she had met and married an American G.I., Sidney Kirschner.

Still, Ann says, this period, "when the personal becomes the historical," has posed many challenges.

First among them was Sala herself. Her mother, who turned 80 on March 5, took a lot of convincing, says Ann. "Her biggest reservation was that nobody would care." And, she adds, there was also "the anguish of having to tell the story to me."

Sala says she can't quite explain how she managed to keep the letters with her throughout the war. During searches, she sometimes buried them. And, as with her own survival, she says, "a little bit was luck."

During the war, reading and rereading the letters gave her strength to live. "This was my connection with my family, with my friends, with life," she says.

And now, as she and her daughter prepare to put the letters on display, Sala is growing more comfortable with the thought that others will see them. The letters, she says, "are something that somehow or other were saved for a purpose."

Holocaust experts say the collection is an important one. For one, little has been written on the role of the Nazi labor camps, which used Jews and others as slave workers to help support the war economy.

The camps in which Sala was interned -- Geppersdorf, Gross Sarne, and Brande in Germany; Laurahutte, Gross Paniow, and Blechhammer in Poland; and Schaltzlar in what was then Czechoslovakia -- were part of a network of 162 labor camps controlled by a Nazi bureaucrat named Albrecht Schmelt. (This writer's father, Victor Blumenstyk, the same age as Sala and also from Sosnowitz, was imprisoned in some of the same labor camps.) At its height, the network held as many as 50,000 Jews from Sosnowitz and other communities in the Upper Silesia region of Poland.

Sala's collection also includes the only known surviving correspondence of Ala Gartner, and a photograph of her. The photo was taken in 1941 in Sosnowitz, during a three-day furlough home for Sala. It was the last time Sala would see most of her family or her friend, who was hanged at Auschwitz in 1945.

Joke Kniesmeijer, a former curator with the Anne Frank Foundation who is helping to curate the Yeshiva exhibition, says Sala's letters are notable as much for what they say as for what they are. The odds that a collection like this would survive through so many

searches and transports "are incredibly small," she says.

Still, the letters pose some challenges for the museum. An exhibition needs to be three-dimensional and dynamic, and the letters, by themselves, are not. Working through a nonprofit organization, the French Children of the Holocaust, Ms. Kirschner is now seeking to raise \$125,000 to produce blowups of the letters, along with maps, timelines, and other historical documentation to augment the exhibit.

Meanwhile, Sala herself has helped, with one more unexpected treasure for her daughter.

Ann had discussed with her mother the museum's concerns about the paucity of "objects" to enliven the exhibit. A few weeks ago, Sala presented her with a small suitcase, about the size of a handbag, containing two blouses. The little suitcase is the one Sala had packed for herself in Sosnowitz the day she was shipped to her first labor camp, in October 1940. One of the blouses is the same one she wore in the 1941 photograph taken of herself with Ala.

Ann was dumbstruck. She had never seen the valise or the blouses before.

"We haven't finished taking things out of the closet," says Ann. "That's true for many survivors."

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