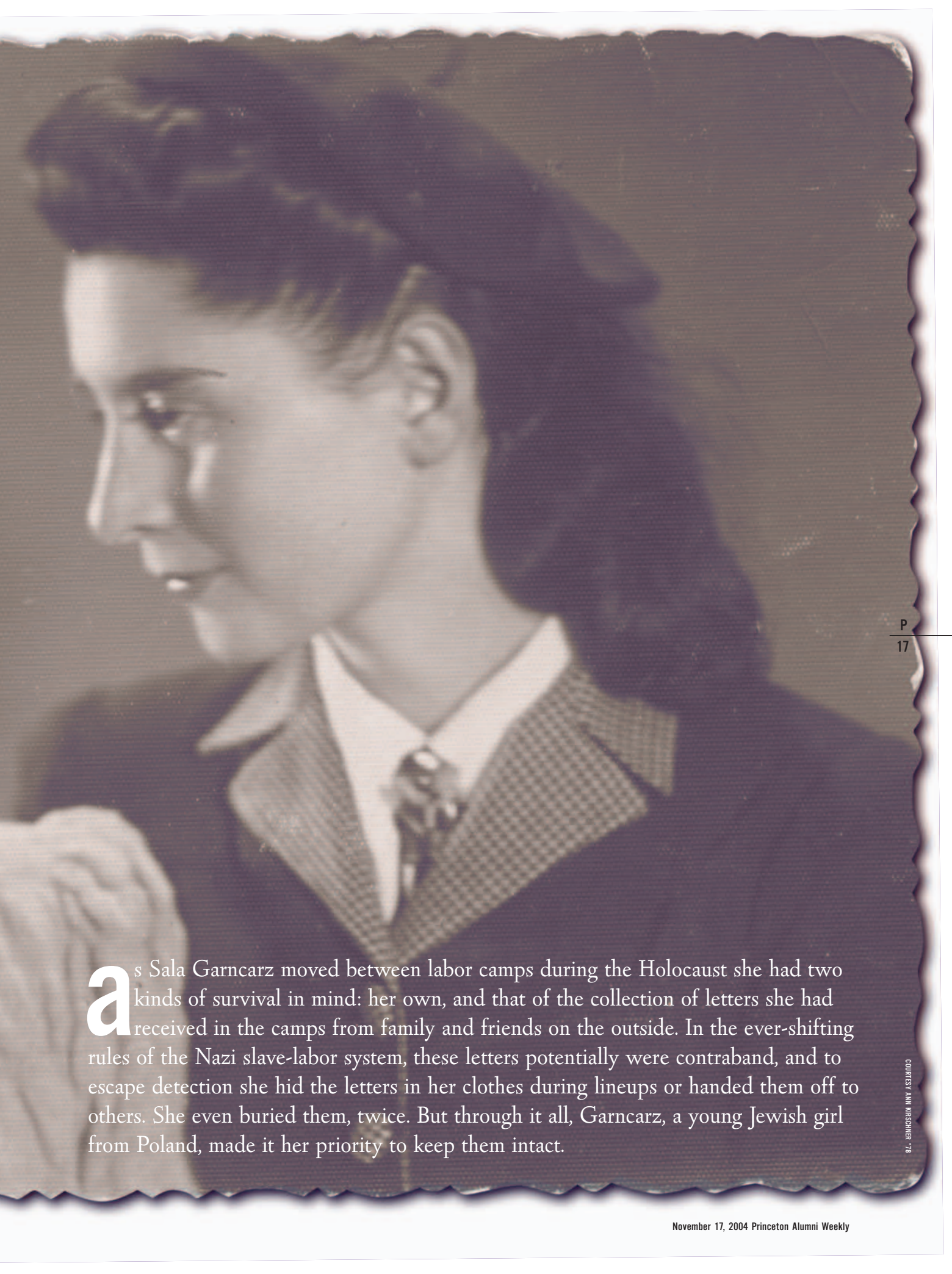


Ala Gartner, left, and Sala Garncaz in
Sosnowiec, Poland, September 1941.

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Sala's story

Ann Kirschner '78 brings her mother's hidden letters from the Holocaust
into public view By Anne Ruderman '01



as Sala Garncarz moved between labor camps during the Holocaust she had two kinds of survival in mind: her own, and that of the collection of letters she had received in the camps from family and friends on the outside. In the ever-shifting rules of the Nazi slave-labor system, these letters potentially were contraband, and to escape detection she hid the letters in her clothes during lineups or handed them off to others. She even buried them, twice. But through it all, Garncarz, a young Jewish girl from Poland, made it her priority to keep them intact.

COURTESY ANN HIRSCHNER '78

Over the course of the war, Garncarz, now 80, saved more than 300 letters, written to her from correspondents including her sister, her boyfriend, and a woman who became a well-known resistance leader and Garncarz's mentor and protector. She also preserved several pages from a diary she kept during her first weeks in the labor camp. The letters make up one of the largest collections of their kind, revealing the life of a single girl caught in a horrific, but still relatively understudied, part of the German camp system.

After the war, Garncarz married an American soldier, immigrated to New York, and stowed the letters away in a "Spill and Spell" game in a succession of closets, ignoring them for decades. It was not until she faced heart surgery in 1992 that she handed her collection over to her daughter, Ann Kirschner '78, and began to tell her story. For Kirschner, it was a moment of astonishment and the beginning of a long process of revelation, after a childhood of silence on the subject of her mother's wartime experience. Now, Kirschner is planning to donate the collection to a major library, and is working on an

family story she had ever known," notes Debórah Dwork '75, the Rose Professor of Holocaust History at Clark University. "At the same time she was lucky she was 16 and not 6, or 56 or 46, because she was a healthy young person and she needed every bit of resources – physical and emotional – to bear the situation she was forced to endure."

Garncarz began receiving postcards from Raizel just a week after she reported to camp, and she continued to receive mail from the outside world through 1943.

During the last two years of the war, communication was cut off almost completely, but female prisoners within Garncarz's camp smuggled each other notes and birthday cards. Garncarz kept these, too.

Although letter-writing was allowed early on, Dwork says, it was fairly rare and was subject to local rule-making, rather than a regime-wide policy. "It wasn't like letters were flying back and forth across the continent of Europe,"

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exhibition to be held at Yeshiva University sometime in 2005.

"What's unusual here is there are over 300 letters all sent to one person that stretch out over the whole of the war, so you see the arc of the war," says Kirschner, 53. "You have a sense of social history, of how the war would forever affect the life of one young, beautiful girl."

The last of 11 children, Garncarz grew up in Sosnowiec, Poland, a city of 130,000, including 28,000 Jews. The family was well-educated, but extremely poor; as many as seven family members lived together in a one-room attic apartment with a single window that looked out onto the roof.

When the Germans invaded in 1939, the Garncarz family was unprepared. They had little knowledge of the wider world; Garncarz's parents, fluent in Yiddish and Hebrew, barely spoke Polish, let alone German. "They knew things had changed, but no one understood what the Hitler regime might mean," Kirschner says.

A year after the Germans arrived, the Garncarz family received an order for Raizel Garncarz, Sala's older sister, to report for six weeks of work at the Geppersdorf labor camp in Germany. Raizel was intelligent, but bookish and almost reclusively shy. At 16, Sala was both pretty and daring – she remembers sneaking out at night to forage for extra rations – and had a cadre of friends and a girlish enthusiasm about her. When the work order came, she convinced the family that she would fare better in Raizel's place. The six weeks turned into almost five years and Garncarz lived through seven different labor camps.

"Sala went into a situation which was without precedent, not only in her life but in any history she had ever read or



explains Dwork, who serves on the Sala Project Advisory Council. "My guess is that local conditions prevailed."

The letters



Garncarz received were required

to be written in German. They bore a "Z" mark from the censor and often carried a Hitler stamp. In adherence to a Nazi rule that required Jews whose names were not deemed sufficiently "Jewish" to add "Sara" or "Israel," the cards and letters were addressed to Sala-Sara, or Sala S. Garncarz.

Her primary letter-writer was Raizel, who wrote her sister on behalf of the family. Written in German, a language Raizel was just learning, her letters mark time by the Jewish calendar and balance a concern for Sala with hints of the growing anxiety inside the ghetto. "It wasn't a particularly sophisticated German," Kirschner says. "It was a high schooler's German, and Yiddish creeps in when she can't help it."

Raizel's letters change in tone as the war wears on and con-

ditions in the ghetto worsen. Although she worries about Sala and admonishes her to write more, Raizel also tells her sister she is fortunate to be working and out of harm's way.

"How lucky you are; there are many who envy you because you have work," Raizel writes in May 1942, a few months before the ghetto was liquidated, when work and food were scarce and deportations had become far more frequent. "Be happy, be glad and thank God a thousand times every day that you still have somebody to whom you can write with the way things are going here."

Garncarz's second letter-writer was Harry Haubenstock, a Jewish man she met in the Laurahutte labor camp and with whom she fell in love. A businessman from Czechoslovakia, Haubenstock

Auschwitz death camp for their participation in an October 1944 uprising there. In the largest act of resistance at Auschwitz, Gartner helped smuggle into the camp explosives that were used to blow up a gas chamber and crematorium. The uprising was crushed and Gartner confessed under torture. Ala is "a figure of history who has never spoken in her own voice," Kirschner says. "What gave Ala the courage or the depth or the savvy to do what she did?" Her letters to Garncarz provide a rare first-person account of her life during the war.

The two women came to know each other at Geppersdorf, after Gartner befriended the teenage Garncarz at the train station the day they departed. A sophisticated and wealthy woman in her early 30s, Gartner looked after Garncarz in the camp, finding her a spot to sleep, making sure she didn't get transferred, and generally teaching her how to survive. In the letters and in Garncarz's memory, Gartner looms larger than life.

As Garncarz remembers it: "My mother brought me to the transport. I was her baby and she wouldn't let me go. ... This woman comes over to her and says, 'You don't have to worry about it, I am going on the same train, I will take care of your child.' That's how I met her and she did take good care of me."

In September,

Garncarz and Gartner, who was from a well-connected family, had an extraordinarily unusual leave from the camp and returned to Sosnowiec, where Garncarz saw her parents and most of her family for the last time. Although Gartner managed to remain outside the labor camp, working for the Jewish government in Bendzin near Sosnowiec, Garncarz had to return. They wrote to each other.

Planning for the annihilation of the Jews – The Final Solution – began after the leave, in January 1942. Yet in her letters, Gartner exudes a lightness and an optimism that is incredible. "Suddenly, I'm here at the post office. The mail is going out today and how could I not write my Sala?" Gartner writes in 1943, days before she was deported to Auschwitz. "We are well and plan to go to the camp. Today is a gorgeous day, we are in the best of spirits and have great hopes for the future."

Because the letters were all written to her, Garncarz's voice is almost entirely absent from the collection. The few diary pages reveal a young girl who was passionate, sincere, and unmistakably 16. But it is possible to get a sense of Garncarz's character and personality from the letters others wrote to her.



was every bit the suitor, headlong in love and wooing Garncarz with his words. "Believe me, most precious little Sala, that I hardly recognize myself any longer," he writes. "I have changed so much and if someone were to see me now, they would hardly believe that I should be capable of such a deep and sincere love."

Haubenstock had influence in the camp and used it to swing unheard-of privileges, like having a photograph taken of the two of them. Although they were eventually split between different camps, Garncarz hung onto his letters, his baby picture, and the hope that they would reunite.

The third major voice in Garncarz's collection is, historically, the most significant. This is the voice of Ala Gartner (also spelled "Gertner"), one of four women hanged at the

From left, Ala Gartner, who protected Sala Garncarz in Sala's first labor camp, ca. 1941; Sala in a family photo, ca. 1936; a postcard sent to Sala while she was in a labor camp. (The card carries the censor's "Z" stamp and is addressed to "Sala-Sara," indicating that she was Jewish.)

"The vividness and tenacity of the people writing to this woman in the camp are a signal of her enormous emotional importance to them," says Verlyn Klinenberg '82, a member of the *New York Times* editorial board and the Sala Project Advisory Council. "It's like a play where the central character is never on stage but dominates all of the action."

For Garncarz, the letters became surrogates for people she knew and might never see again. "It was like family, you hold onto it," she explains. "We didn't know what would happen to us. If those letters go, I have nothing, so I must hold onto them."

Garncarz was part of the Schmelt labor system, a network of camps operated by Nazi bureaucrat Albrecht Schmelt and designed to aid the German war effort. Created well before the Nazi decision to murder the Jews, Schmelt's network eluded Heinrich Himmler's control over the concentration- and death-camp system. Schmelt jealously guarded the independence of his enterprise. At its height, the Schmelt network included about 160 camps and 50,000 workers.

Life in the camps grew harsher as the war drew on, both because of implementation of Hitler's annihilation plan and because of food shortages throughout Europe, Dwork explains, noting, "The last people to receive food were incarcerated Jews." But Garncarz survived due to a combination of skill, personality, age, and extraordinary luck. Two unexpected factors also worked in her favor, Kirschner notes.

Because she came from a poor family, she was used to doing without and didn't experience the level of shock and total devastation that wealthier prisoners had to cope with. Being in the labor camp system early helped her too; she learned the routines and made contacts with German guards in the camp network.

"I became the pet of the Germans where they were watching us and I got away with things other people couldn't; that was the truth," Garncarz remembers. She says that she was sometimes given an easier job or leftovers to eat. Still, terror was everywhere. Guards were armed and constantly held dogs at the ready. Prisoners could be searched or summoned by the S.S. at random. There was always a sense that those who could not work to the Nazis' liking would be killed.

"On the one hand the Nazi ideologues wanted to get rid of the Jews, but on the other hand they also needed labor from the Jews to create their utopian fantasy," Dwork explains. "In the end their wish to annihilate overrode the practical use of labor."

Eventually, most of the labor camps were subsumed under Auschwitz, but Garncarz was fortunate and spent the last two years of the war in a remote Czechoslovakian labor camp. "By the time things got totally out of control with the extermination camps, she was tucked away in a corner of Czechoslovakia," Kirschner says.

Garncarz's letters are significant, Holocaust scholars say, because they offer a way into a lesser-studied aspect of the Nazi operation. "The image we have of the Holocaust is the places where people were murdered – Auschwitz and Treblinka," says Doug Greenberg, president and chief executive officer of the Shoah Foundation. "Letters like these help fill out the picture of life under the Nazis."

As historical documents Garncarz's letters are something of an anomaly because they offer a written record from victims of the Nazi regime, who were usually unable to leave anything in the way of writing behind. Although there have been recent efforts to record the testimony of the survivors, such as taped interviews made by the Shoah Foundation, most written documentation from the era itself came from the Nazis themselves, not from their victims. "Most of the written scholarship about the Holocaust was drawn from sources left by the Nazis about the development of the policies of the Nazi government in the creation of the Final Solution," says Greenberg, a former Princeton history professor.

After the war Garncarz tried to reconnect with her boyfriend, Haubenstock, but he had found a new love. During services in Ansbach, Germany, for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, Garncarz met Kirschner's



This page, top, right, Sala and Harry Haubenstock in the Laurahutte labor camp in 1942; left, Sala after the war at the synagogue in Ansbach, Germany, where she met her husband, Sidney Kirschner; above, Sala and Sidney Kirschner.

father, an American soldier. She sailed to the United States on the first boat of war brides and was married in a borrowed wedding gown a week after she arrived.

Of Garncarz's large family, only Sala, Raizel, and another sister, Blima, are known to have survived the war after the liquidation of Sosnowiec in August 1942. Garncarz's parents died in Auschwitz. Three siblings died either in camps or in the ghetto, and a fourth was killed while serving in the Polish Army. One brother went to Russia as a Communist in 1939 and was never heard from again. (Three other siblings died before the war.)

In her new life in a new country, Garncarz – by then, Sala Kirschner – stashed the letters away, along with a suitcase and a blouse she had brought to the camps. When she reopened them, almost five decades later, she could no longer read the Polish or German well enough to translate and had long since

“I know many times I have pushed her to tell me things and share experiences and to be as precise and deep in recollection as she can be,” Ann Kirschner says. “That puts me in a terrible position of sometimes causing her pain.”

forgotten what the documents said. “Sometimes I get very upset that I don’t remember the names of all the friends and the family who wrote to me,” says the elder Kirschner, who is now frail from osteoporosis and arthritis. “Every day we didn’t know what the next day would bring. I kept all these things sleeping in the back of my brain.”

Like many children of Holocaust survivors, Ann Kirschner grew up knowing almost nothing of her mother’s past. “I knew she had survived, but I didn’t know what she had survived,” Kirschner says. “It was a subject we didn’t broach.” So she had nothing to prepare her for the day, just before her mother’s surgery in 1992, when Garncarz handed over a cardboard box with the collection of letters inside.

“The sense of wonder that I would really be able to encounter my mother’s experience was uppermost in my mind,” Kirschner remembers. “All of those submerged questions about my mother’s experience in the war that I thought would never be satisfied came spilling out.”

Although the letters offered Kirschner an entry point into her mother’s past, in some ways they raised as many questions as they answered. “There was a new sense of kinship. I knew my mother now in a way I hadn’t before,” Kirschner says. “But it also introduced a subtle new tension into our relationship, because now I was less satisfied with dark corners. I wanted to illuminate more.”

In 1994, Kirschner organized a family trip with her parents and two brothers to Eastern Europe, where they visited her mother’s old home and the sites of the seven labor camps where she worked during the war. Only one of the camps, in the Czech Republic, was standing. When her mother balked on the stairway of her childhood home, afraid to go further, Kirschner gently pushed her on.

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share experiences and to be as precise and deep in recollection as she can be,” Kirschner says. “That puts me in a terrible position of sometimes causing her pain.”

For Kirschner, the challenge now is to make her mother’s letters available for historians and meaningful for a public audience. Whatever their personal significance, Kirschner thinks the letters have too much historical meaning just to keep them in the family.

“This is primary source material from an important era of history,” says Kirschner, who received her Ph.D. in English and is now president of a media, education, and technology-management consulting company in New York. “These correspondents speak to us directly about what they are feeling and seeing and thinking. It’s like a time capsule that has been perfectly preserved.”

Kirschner is currently trying to raise at least \$125,000 for the exhibit through the French Children of the Holocaust Foundation. Organizers hope to incorporate voices and other contextual clues into the exhibit to help bring the letters to life.

“The trick is to let them serve as an inspiration, but also as a nexus for research and further artistic development,” says


Klinkenborg. “There are so many ways into the letters and so many ways out of them. There are so many stories in this collection.”

But even translated, parts of the letters still don’t make sense. Knowing they would be censored, the letter-writers relied upon codes to convey sensitive information, using the word for “wedding,” for example, to connote a deportation, or



The Kirschner family visiting Ansbach, Germany, in 1994. From left, Sidney, Joseph, Sala, Ann, and David. Joseph Kirschner died Oct. 23, 2004.

referring to cultural or family clues to indicate death or danger.

“People who are deeply steeped in this period will be able to see a whole world of allusions and circumstances that I can’t see,” says Kirschner. For her, that means there is more discovery ahead. 

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