

Holocaust survivor's story comes to life at Marcus Jewish center

by Mary Cosgrove

mcosgrove@neighbornewspapers.com

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Ann Kirschner was given a rare gift in 1991 — the opportunity to tell her mother's story and to illuminate a part of history that, at the time, was mostly untold.

Kirschner's mother, Sala Garncarz Kirschner, was a survivor of the Holocaust. Instead of being sent to a concentration camp, however, the 16-year-old Jewish girl from Poland was sent to work in seven different labor camps.

Laborers were allowed correspondence with family members, and though all letters were mandated to be burned after reading, Kirschner's mother was able to hide them, preserving her story.

These 350 “jigsaw puzzle pieces,” as Kirschner calls them, were given to her by her mother in 1991.

Kirschner, whose career was mostly in media and technology at the time, said she felt compelled to write her mother's story.

“What I quickly discovered was that it was not only my personal legacy but a legacy of history,” she said. “It wasn't about writing a book. It was about preserving these letters for generations to come.”

Three years of work led to a first draft of her book “Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story,” but after initially being rejected by publishing houses, Kirschner shelved it. In 2002, she renewed her efforts, first by donating the collection of letters to the New York Public Library. In 2006 the book was published and has since been published in six other countries and languages.

In 2004, the book was adapted into a play and in addition to the exhibition in New York, there are also two other traveling exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe.

Kirschner said she and her mother, who is now 90, never imagined the far-reaching effects of the book.

“It was like a rock thrown into a lake and the ripple effect began, and to this day it has not stopped,” she said. She is continuously getting feedback from those who have read the book or have seen the play or the exhibition.

Kirschner said writing the book was a difficult process, especially when discovering that her mother's parents and many of her siblings died in Auschwitz, a fact her mother wasn't aware of in the labor camp.

“[It was] a very painful reconstruction for history for me as a writer and even more as a daughter,” she said.

But telling the story became a mission.

“We are honoring the memory of people who otherwise have left no trace behind,” she said. “This went from being my mother’s story to my story ... and then to the readers of my book and the members of the audience who go to the play. We all become the storytellers. That’s a great source of comfort to my mother because it becomes a living story and not one that is locked in her own memory.”

Kirschner said it is her hope those who see the play will put themselves in her mother’s shoes and experience what she did, to determine what they would do to survive in such a devastating period of history.

DeKalb residents will have the opportunity to do so.

The Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta has partnered with Dunwoody’s Stage Door Players to produce the play “Letters to Sala.”

Along with the play, the center will host an exhibition of the letters.

Center department of arts and culture special projects manager Kim Goodfriend said the hope is people will attend the play and also stop by the exhibition before and afterwards.

She said the exhibition and the play have a unique draw, since it is not a typical Holocaust story.

“We hear Holocaust and think about concentration camps, barbed wire and striped uniforms,” she said. “[Sala’s] story is about labor camps. This is not a typical story of loss and devastation.”

Goodfriend said the center tries to keep history alive and the stories of Jewish individuals remembered, and the play and exhibition are ways of doing that.

“It is perfectly aligned with the notion that we have to find new ways to teach about historical events,” she said. Goodfriend said this is particularly true as the generation of Holocaust survivors begins to dwindle.

“There are some things that make us who we are and why we are who we are,” she said.

“Without being able to reach out and touch somebody’s grandparent or hear the story, how are we going to learn it?”

The play opens April 24 at 8 p.m. and will run through April 27. Performances will be Friday at noon, Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$15 to \$27 and discounts for students, seniors and center members are available.

The exhibition will be on display April 10 through May 28.

For more information, call (678) 812-4000 or visit www.atlantajcc.org.