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How does one survive the separation from family and friends and the familiar life one had known before entering a Nazi labor camp?

For 16-year-old Sala Garncarz the answer was in preserving letters from home. Sala's amazing story is presented in the play and art exhibition "Letters to Sala" at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta in April.

In 1940, Sala, the youngest of 11 children of a rabbi living in Sosnowiec, Poland, left home for Geppersdorf, a German forced labor camp. Over the next five years, she was incarcerated at seven different labor camps. Conditions at the camps were poor even though the inmates there were expected to work to advance the Nazi war effort.

To try to convey an image of normalcy, the Nazis allowed labor camp prisoners to send and receive correspondence.

During Sala's stay in the camps, she was able to retain more than 300 pieces of correspondence received from family and friends.

After the war, Sala married an American G.I., Sidney Kirschner, and in 1946 she came to the United States as a war bride. Her box of letters was placed on a shelf in a closet and her experiences during the war were not discussed with anyone, not even her husband and children. But in 1991, nearly 50 years after her ordeal began and shortly before undergoing heart surgery, she gave the box of letters to her daughter, Ann Kirschner.

"I have never forgotten the day my mother gave me that package of letters," state Kirschner. "I knew almost nothing about her past. I knew she'd been in a Nazi camp, but not which camp or for how long. I didn't know what had happened to her family. And I had no idea that she could have received and preserved so many letters from home. Seeing the letters was like being hit by lightning. Finally, a door had opened to a place I most wanted to visit – the world of my mother as a young girl."

"Letters to Sala" is a play based upon Kirschner's book *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story* (Simon and Schuster, 2006). Written by playwright Arlene Hutton, the show's dialogue is taken directly from the letters Sala received. The production features a stellar cast of Atlanta talent with Susan Shalhoub Larkin as Sala, Rachel Garner as Ann Kirschner and Rachel Frawley as the young Sala. The production opens April 24 with the last performance on April 27, Holocaust Memorial Day 2014.

In conjunction with the play, presented as a co-production of the MJCCA and a local theater company, an exhibit of some of Sala's letters and photographs will be exhibited at the MJCCA's Katz Family Mainstreet Gallery from April 10-May 28. The exhibit is opened to the public free of charge and is curated by Dr. Jill Vexler. It is on loan from the New York Public Library and the French Children of the Holocaust Foundation.

The exhibition is a graphic representation of Sala's story told through her letters, postcards, photographs, and a diary of her years in the Nazi work camps, documents which she carefully hid in her barracks or sewed into her clothing. For Sala, the letters provided evidence that her world still existed outside the camps. Saving the letters became inextricably linked to preserving her own life.

"My family and I are delighted that the public has the opportunity to experience my mother's incredible story of survival and courage through the play and the exhibit," said Kirschner. "When the world seemed entirely hostile, a young girl found refuge and hope in these remarkable letters written by her family and friends. I hope that audiences will engage with my mother's story and make it their own. We can all engage with the past and connect with it through works or art that touch our emotions and make us cry and laugh – yes, there was humor as well as horror in the darkest days. When the past comes alive in this way, it is an affirmation of life."

The play "Letters to Sala" will be presented at the MJCCA on Thursday, April 24 at 8:00 p.m., Friday, April 25 at noon, Saturday, April 26 at 8 p.m. and Sunday April 27 at 2 p.m.

Tickets are \$15-\$27 with discounts for students, seniors, groups, MJCCA members, and SDP subscribers. Contact the box office at 678-812-4002.