

Sala Garncarz Kirschner

1924–



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Sixteen-year-old Sala Garncarz was taken from her family in 1940 and sent to a Nazi forced-labor camp. Despite five years of horrible conditions, she survived. Decades later, she shared her mementos of that time and place.



As you read the biography below, ask yourself what personal qualities helped Sala survive the Holocaust. What outside forces helped her?



Joyce Dopkeen/The New York Times

When in 1940 Sala Garncarz was sent to a Nazi labor camp, she was 16 years old. For the next five years, Sala, a Polish Jew, worked in seven different camps.

Jews sent to these places were slightly better off than others who went to the concentration camps. German industries used the people in the work camps as cheap or free labor, so there was some effort to keep prisoners healthy enough to continue working. Still, guards with guns and dogs patrolled the camps, living conditions were horrible, and life grew more difficult as Germany slowly lost the war.

Sala's youth and strength helped her survive, as did working at many different camps and growing to know the guards and the routine of camp life. Amid all the horror, she managed to have some of the happy experiences common to 16-year-olds anywhere. For example, she fell in love. The young man, another prisoner, was from Czechoslovakia.

Sala also was befriended by another inmate, Ala Gartner, an older woman from Sala's hometown who looked out for Sala and helped the lonely and frightened girl in her early days of camp life. Gartner came from a wealthy, influential family, and for a while she was given some special privileges. One of these was a pass to leave the camp briefly, which she and Sala used to visit their homes. That was the last time Sala saw her parents. (Gartner, in her 30s, later was sent to Auschwitz, where she was one of the leaders of a rebellion that blew up a gas chamber and a crematorium. She was hanged by the Nazis.)

As hard as Sala's life was, she received a letter in 1942 from her sister saying that the family considered Sala one of the lucky ones: Jews from their ghetto were now being taken to concentration camps. After the war, Sala learned that her parents, too, had eventually been taken and were

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murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz. Three of her brothers and sisters also entered Auschwitz and were never heard of again.

Throughout her years in the camps, Sala saved letters and postcards she received from family and friends in the outside world, notes from fellow prisoners, love notes from her boyfriend, photographs, and pages from her own diary. This was no easy task when prisoners were searched several times a day and forbidden to have any of their own possessions. Twice Sala buried the papers, and often she had the help of her fellow inmates and even some of the camp guards in keeping them safe.

At war's end Sala met a soldier from New York City, Sydney Kirschner. They became engaged, and Sala was among the first of the "war brides" to arrive in the United States. She was married in a borrowed gown; two sisters—all that was left of her family by now—were still in Europe.

Sala and her husband had three children. She did not talk about her life during the war; she said she did not want to give her children such a burden to carry. She wanted them to grow up secure and happy, to live "normal" lives. She put her collection of papers in a box in a closet.

In her 80s and facing heart surgery, Sala took out the box and gave it to her adult daughter Ann. Sala had saved over 300 documents. Sala explained why she tried so hard for five years to save the papers, "It was like family—you hold onto it. We didn't know what would happen to us. If those letters go, I have nothing, so I must hold on to them."

Now, exhibitions of this collection, which has been donated to the New York Public Library, are to be held at that library and also in Israel. They present a unique viewpoint of a terrible history, but they also speak of survival.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What kinds of things did young Sala collect in the work camps?

2. **Infer** Choose three words or short phrases that you think describe Sala. Explain your choices.

3. **Evaluate** One reader has called Sala's collection "heartbreaking." Do you agree or disagree with this description? Why?
