

LETTERS TO SALA
by Arlene Hutton

For permissions and licensing, contact

Dramatists Play Service, Inc.
440 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016
Tel. 212-683-8960
Fax 212-213-1539
www.dramatists.com

for Lawrence Sacharow,
for Ann, Elisabeth and Caroline
and, especially, for Sala.

The play can be performed by as few as five women and one man, but the preferred casting would be at least eight women and three or four men. A school production could be done with a much larger cast, eighteen or even up to thirty or more, as there are twenty-five named speaking roles and the opportunity for an ensemble in the camp scenes.

In a small cast version, the actresses playing ANN, ELISABETH & CAROLINE could double as ALA, RAIZEL, BLIMA but the actress playing YOUNG SALA should not double. One actor could play all the men, since they never appear on stage together, but the addition of a second actor gives the opportunity for more soldiers. The Nazi dialogue can be trimmed or cut to accommodate the production. Running time is about ninety-five minutes.

The playwright encourages the use of nontraditional casting. There were tens of thousands of Africans living in Germany and surrounding nations at the time of the Holocaust, in addition to Roma and other ethnic groups; some of them ended up in the camps.

CHARACTERS (may double, as needed)

New York City:

SALA GARNCARZ, an older woman who survived the Holocaust

ANN, Sala's daughter

ELISABETH, Sala's granddaughter, late teens

CAROLINE, Elisabeth's younger sister, about the same age as Young Sala

In Sosnowiec, in the camps, after the liberation:

YOUNG SALA, 16 years old at the beginning of the play

In Sosnowiec:

CHANA, Sala's mother

RAIZEL, Sala's sister

BLIMA, LAYA DINA, Sala's other sisters

GLIKA, Sala's cousin

BELA, FRYMKA, SARA, friends from home

In the camps:

ALA GERTNER, 20s, an elegant woman from a prosperous Jewish family

CHAIM KAUFMAN, a friend of the Garncarz family

HARRY HAUBENSTOCK, a handsome prisoner

ELFRIEDE PACHE, a young German woman

HERBERT PACHE, her brother, a Nazi soldier

LUCIA, GUCIA, ZUSI, RACHEL, fellow prisoners in the labor camps

NAZI OFFICER, YOUNG NAZI SOLDIER, NAZI GUARDS

After the liberation:

SIDNEY KIRSCHNER, an American soldier

SETTING

New York City, 2004-2005

Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, in the 1940s

VISUAL ELEMENTS

There are many ways to stage this play and it has been exciting to see it produced with no scenery or with elaborate scenery; with projections or not; with live music, taped music or no music; in a large proscenium theatre or a black box or in the round.

Maybe the actors change costumes. Maybe they don't. It is possible that there is a growing pile of clothing, especially coats, that becomes a mountain by the end of the play. There could be a projection screen showing images and indicating dates and place names.

There are three main playing areas that may overlap and intersect:

- A table with chairs, representing New York City in 2004. All the scenes with Ann and Caroline and the older Sala use this playing area.
- Another table and chairs, representing the Garncarz home in Sosnowiec. Letters from Raizel are read from this playing area.
- Non-specific areas. The rest of the action - the train station, the camps, etc. - takes place center stage or at other locations.

There are no blackouts between scenes. The changes are fluid, with the scenes overlapping and interrupting each other when possible, as the actors switch from the past to the present. We may not even know sometimes if it is then or now, if the story is being acted out or if a memory is being told. The actors in one scene should never freeze while a scene is occurring on another part of the stage, but in the shadows go about their business.

The physical letters themselves are an integral part of the play and should be shown whenever possible. Images of the actual letters and cards may be projected on a screen or wall. Actors reading the letters may hand them to Sala. She might bury them under the mound of clothing or in hiding places on the set, pass them off to her friends or even make members of the audience co-conspirators in her need to hide and keep her mail. Young Sala can see the writers when they are reading, but her eyes follow the letters as they are "mailed," i.e. as the actors hold them out for her to grab or drop them on the floor for her to find.

It is essential that historic photos of the letters and Sala's friends and family be shown to the audience: as projections or in the program or as a lobby display. Sala risked her life to keep these and it is important they be seen. The images may be found online at the website with resources for producing and studying the script.

LETTERS TO SALA
by Arlene Hutton

The play moves back and forth in time and space, from 2004 in New York City to 1940's wartime Poland, Germany and Czechoslovakia.

There are many ways to stage this play, but all that is really necessary are a couple of tables and some chairs. Perhaps there is scenery. Or not. Perhaps there are projections of dates and places as well as photographs of the people the characters are based on. But there are always three major playing areas: Ann's New York City apartment in 2004, represented by a dining table and three or four chairs; the Garncarz home, a tenement in 1940s Poland, which also has a table and chairs; and a general playing area where all the other scenes take place. This neutral space becomes the train station, a home in Geppersdorf, various areas in several labor camps in Nazi Germany, and places in Europe after the Liberation.

Lighting directs the audience's attention from one playing area to another, but there are no blackouts. The action moves fluidly between scenes and there is no gap in the dialogue between scenes; actors should enter a new scene while the previous one is still going on. The life in New York may continue in a dim light during a scene in Poland or the camps. And vice versa.

NEW YORK CITY, 2004, and SOSNOWIEC, POLAND, 1940.

Lights up on SALA, sitting at the table in Ann's apartment. SALA holds a child's game "Spill and Spell" box and stares at the scene playing out on the other side of the stage.

There, representing the Garncarz home, a tenement in 1940s Poland, is another table and three chairs.

Lights up on CHANA, an older Jewish woman, and her daughters RAIZEL, a frail-looking young woman with glasses and BLIMA. They are all looking at an official-looking letter. There is a sense of urgency; the lines often overlap.

ANN enters with a small suitcase and a file folder, followed by her daughters ELISABETH and CAROLINE, who carries a card. On the other side of the stage, YOUNG SALA, a girl of sixteen, rushes in carrying a small package, as the older SALA watches from across time and space.

The scenes in the past and present happen simultaneously and overlap.

ANN

(Entering.) Mother! Mother, it's time to go.

YOUNG SALA

(Running in.) Mother! Mother! I found some bread.

RAIZEL

(To Blima.) I'll write you every day.

YOUNG SALA

Mother!

BLIMA

(To Young Sala.) Sala, Hush.

CAROLINE

Bubbe! I wrote you a letter to read at the hospital.

ANN

I've got all your paperwork.

YOUNG SALA

Mother!

RAIZEL

Sala, be quiet.

CAROLINE

Here! I'll put it in your suitcase.

ELISABETH

(Seeing the box.) Are you going to play “Spill and Spell” at the hospital?

ANN

I haven’t seen that game in years. I thought it was lost.

CHANA

(Looking at an official-looking letter.) What if the letter had been lost in the mail?

CAROLINE

I want to play.

ELISABETH

(To Caroline.) You’ll be at summer camp.

YOUNG SALA

Mother, let me go.

RAIZEL

It wasn’t lost in the mail. It came. The letter came. It wasn’t lost.

ANN

Mother. I’m packing your blue sweater. Your room might be chilly.

CHANA

(Looking into the suitcase.) This sweater won’t keep you warm.

BLIMA

Take my blue wool.

YOUNG SALA

I could go in your place, Raizel.

RAIZEL

The brown sweater’s good enough.

ELISABETH

I’ll miss you, Bubbe.

ANN

Is your grandfather ready?

ELISABETH

Poppy's in the car with Dad.

BLIMA

(To Young Sala.) Sala, did you find some bread?

YOUNG SALA

Yes.

BLIMA

Good girl. *(To Raizel.)* How's your stomach?

ANN

(To Sala.) Mother, I'm packing your medicines. Just in case. They should have it on your chart, but just in case. I'll be with you most of the time, anyway.

ELISABETH

(To Sala.) How long will you be gone?

CAROLINE

(To Sala.) I'll write you letters while I'm gone for the summer.

ANN

(To Sala.) Would you rather have your brown sweater?

CHANA

You translated the letter wrong. Isn't it in German? Maybe you misunderstood.

RAIZEL

No, Mother, I didn't. The letter says that I have to go to the labor camp.

CAROLINE

You'll be here when I get back from the summer, won't you?

BLIMA

(To Raizel.) Did you pack your medicine?

CHANA

But you're a teacher. Doesn't it say you're a teacher? Don't they know you're a teacher?

RAIZEL

Mother, the schools are closed.

CHANA

You're not strong. Don't they know you're not strong? Neither you nor Blima are strong.

YOUNG SALA

I'm strong.

RAIZEL

Sala.

BLIMA

(Looking in the suitcase.) I can't find your medicine.

RAIZEL

There's none left.

ELISABETH

(To Ann.) How long will Bubbe be in the hospital?

SALA

(To Elisabeth.) That depends.

CAROLINE

On what?

SALA

(Teasing.) On how hard you pray for me.

ELISABETH

Bubbe!

CAROLINE

(Overlapping.) Bubbe!

YOUNG SALA

(Calling offstage.) Poppa!

CHANA

Shush!

BLIMA

He's praying.

SALA

However long God wills me to be in the hospital, that's how long I'll be in the hospital.

ANN

Mother! (*Looking around.*) Where's my jacket?

ANN exits.

ELISABETH

(*To Sala.*) I'll pray for you.

CAROLINE

I love you, Bubbe.

ELISABETH

I love you, too.

SALA

And I love my granddaughters. My greatest joys. The greatest joys of my life. Don't worry. Don't worry about Bubbe. Whatever happens, it will all turn out fine. You have your mother and your father and your aunts and uncles and your sister. And your Grandpoppa. You have your family.

YOUNG SALA

(*To Blima.*) Blima, I could go.

RAIZEL

(*To Young Sala.*) You're a child.

BLIMA

(*To Young Sala.*) No. (*To Raizel*) This isn't much bread.

YOUNG SALA

It's all I could find.

BLIMA

(*To Young Sala.*) Go find some writing paper.

YOUNG SALA

(*To Raizel.*) I could go instead of you.

RAIZEL

The letter has my name on it.

YOUNG SALA picks up the letter and reads.

YOUNG SALA

“By order of the Jewish Council of the Elders, Raizel Garncarz will report on October 28, 1940, for six weeks of work at a labor camp...”

CHANA

(To Raizel.) Do you have enough medicine for six weeks?

YOUNG SALA

I could work in a labor camp.

BLIMA

(To Young Sala.) Find some paper. And pencils.

YOUNG SALA

Let me go in Raizel’s place.

CHANA

You’re too young.

RAIZEL

The letter came for me.

YOUNG SALA

Will I get a letter?

CHANA

(Quickly.) No.

BLIMA

(Quickly.) No.

RAIZEL

(Quickly.) No.

YOUNG SALA

I could go instead of you.

CHANA

You don’t know what you’re saying.

YOUNG SALA

You have a better answer?

RAIZEL

Don't speak to your mother like that.

YOUNG SALA

Your stomach gets upset when you travel. I can eat almost anything. (*A beat. No one disagrees with her.*) The letter says they're going to pay.

CHANA

Does it really say that?

BLIMA

Yes.

RAIZEL

The letter says they will pay for the work.

YOUNG SALA

I can work. I can work as well as Raizel can. I can. (*To Raizel.*) I can work better than you. (*To Chana.*) Nothing else makes sense but for me to go.

CHANA

Nothing makes sense.

RAIZEL

My stomach hurts.

YOUNG SALA

See.

BLIMA

What can we do?

CHANA

We can wait and see what happens.

RAIZEL

No, we can't wait. Each family has to pay a tax. Or send one person to work.

YOUNG SALA

You're sick. You can't go.

BLIMA

If we had money to pay the head tax—

YOUNG SALA

I'm going in your place. It's the only answer.

CHANA

No.

RAIZEL

My head hurts. I can't think.

YOUNG SALA

(Over her shoulder, to a far corner of the room.) Poppa?

RAIZEL

Don't bother Poppa.

BLIMA

(Overlapping.) He has enough to worry about.

CHANA

(Overlapping.) God help us.

A car horn is heard.

ELISABETH

Poppy's waiting in the car.

SALA

Then go keep him company! Go!

CAROLINE

I'll play "Spill 'n' Spell" with you when I come home from camp!

ANN enters.

ANN

All set?

ELISABETH

I've got Bubbe's suitcase.

CAROLINE

I'll write you.

The car horn honks again

SALA

Go on. Your mother and I will be down in a minute.

CAROLINE and ELISABETH exit.

ANN

Mother, the car's waiting.

SALA holds out the child's "Spill & Spell" game.

SALA

You should have these.

ANN

What is it?

SALA

My letters from camp.

ANN

Mother, we have to leave.

SALA

Come here. Sit down. Open the box.

ANN

I don't understand.

SALA

These are my letters from the war. (*ANN opens the box and pulls out a packet of letters.*) This is what I have, this is something I never discussed with you before. I was in a labor camp.

ANN

A labor camp?

SALA

During the war.

ANN

A concentration camp?

SALA

No. A labor camp. What do you want to know?

As ANN looks through the box of letters, SALA stares at the other side of the stage, watching her past, in Poland.

YOUNG SALA

I'm going.

RAIZEL

One of us has to go.

CHANA

(To Raizel.) You can't go.

BLIMA

Then it has to be Sala.

YOUNG SALA

It'll be an adventure.

RAIZEL

I'll write to you.

The lights begin to fade on the Garncarz women as they prepare for YOUNG SALA's departure. If the actors exit the scene, it is with purpose, i.e. carrying off the suitcase or the bread. In New York SALA, watching, is interrupted by ANN, who has been looking through the letters.

ANN

Here's your name.

SALA

What?

ANN

(Holding up a letter.) This envelope has your name on it.

SALA

Yes.

ANN

(Reading.) "Geppersdorf." *(To Sala.)* Where's Geppersdorf?

SALA
(*Impatient.*) It was Geppersdorf. A camp.

ANN
A concentration camp?

SALA
No. A labor camp. You don't know anything.

ANN
How should I know about something you never, never mentioned?
Not to me, not to the girls.

SALA
You knew I was in the war.

ANN
Yes, but this is different from any of the stories you've told us.

SALA
So now I tell you.

ANN
There are hundreds of pieces of paper here.

SALA
I never counted.

ANN
Who wrote all these letters?

SALA
My sisters. Friends from Sosnowiec. Friends from camp. Ala. Ala
wrote me for a very long while.

ANN
Who was Ala?

SALA
A friend from the camps.

ANN
"Camps"? More than one?

SALA
Three or four. I don't remember.

ANN

You were in three or four different camps?

SALA

Maybe five?

ANN

Five?

SALA

It was a long time ago.

ANN

You were in five different labor camps.

SALA

No. It was seven.

ANN

Seven!

SALA

Yes. Let's go.

ANN

Wait. How did you save all these letters?

SALA

I hid them.

ANN

I can't wrap my mind around this. How did you get mail? You got letters? In a camp?

SALA

Yes.

ANN

And you saved them? How did you—

SALA

They were important to me.

ANN

So important you never told me about them? Where are these people now?

SALA

Your Aunt Rose is in Brooklyn.

ANN

Yes, of course. But what happened to the others?

SALA

Most of them didn't survive the war. *(A beat.)* I'm tired now. Let's go.

ANN

Okay. We'll look at these later.

SALA

The letters are yours now.

ANN

We can talk about them later. After you come back home from the hospital. Do you have everything?

SALA

I don't need much.

ANN

Mother!

SALA

What?

ANN

Stop worrying.

SALA

Who's worried?

ANN

They do by-pass surgery every day. It's a common procedure.

SALA

(Blowing on her fingers.) Puh-puh. Take care of the letters.

Lights change. In half light SALA watches the next scene, until at some point ANN steers her out the door.

THE TRAIN STATION IN SOSNOWIEC, POLAND. OCTOBER 28, 1940.

On the other side of the stage, YOUNG SALA and her mother CHANA are at the train station in Sosnowiec, Poland. There is much activity among the crowd: suitcases, good-byes, etc. If lines are needed for guards, they could be "Bleib genau da, wo ich gesagt habe" [Stay where I tell you.] "Name." [Name.] "Geh dahin" [Go there.] "Aus dem Weg." [Out of the way.] The GUARDS are stern but not brutal, focused on giving directions.

CHANA

God help you.

YOUNG SALA

I have to get on the train now.

CHANA cries.

YOUNG SALA (continued)

Mother, people are watching us. Don't make them notice us. It's bad.

ALA, a well-dressed woman, walks over to YOUNG SALA and CHANA.

ALA

(To Chana.) Don't cry.

CHANA

(Crying.) My daughter....my child.

ALA

You're worried.

CHANA

Yes.

ALA

Look at me. Don't worry, don't cry, She's going to be all right, do you understand what I'm telling you? Look at me. Listen to what I'm telling you. It will be all right. Don't worry.

(MORE)

ALA (continued)

Don't cry, she's going to be with me. Your daughter, she'll be all right, I'm going to watch over her all the time. I'll take care of your child.

CHANA

God bless you.

ALA

(To Chana.) My name is Ala Gertner. *(To Young Sala.)* What is your name?

YOUNG SALA

Sala.

ALA

Ala and Sala. Almost the same. *(To Chana.)* Ala and Sala.

CHANA

My little Sala.

ALA

(To Chana.) There. Don't cry. Ala and Sala. It was meant to be.

A train whistle is heard.

GUARD

(Yelling orders.) Arous! Arous!

As YOUNG SALA and ALA exit, lights fade on the train station and come up on the New York City side of the stage. Time has passed.. ANN, ELISABETH and CAROLINE are at the table showing SALA translations of the letters.

[NOTE: the play continues. This is just the first two scenes.]