

The SS-man who was a Jewish partisan . . .

MIR is a small town of over 5 000 on the map of Eastern Poland, close to the Russian border. Here, the Jewish population of nearly 2 500 was proud of its world famous rabbinical "university", the Mir Yeshivah.

But when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Jews of Mir became the first victims of the Nazi terror, forced hard labour, hostage-takings and other extermination operations — which included a mass killing on November 7, 1941. And, in May 1942 the ghetto was established in the ruins of the Mirsky Castle. The Jewish population was then about 800. Among them, a small group of refugees from other parts of Poland, who had fled from the German invaders in 1939.

OSWALD ARRIVES

THE ghetto was under the jurisdiction of the Nazi police and security units of the SS. The new commandant, SS Obersturmführer Oswald arrived in the autumn of 1942 and soon became intensely involved in the activities of the ghetto.

But a chance meeting between SS-man Oswald and one of the refugees, Berl Resnik, resulted in one of the most unusual stories to come from World War 2.

Oswald ordered Resnik to his office and then asked: Why don't you greet me with "Shalom"? Don't you recognise me? I am your friend from the Zionist movement in Cracow?

Berl nearly fainted.

THE REAL OSWALD

FEARFULLY, Berl looked again, fearing a trick. But, some minutes later, he said, yes! Now he remembered the young, tall, blond fellow with blue eyes, not at all Jewish looking, who spoke beautiful Polish, knew German and was well versed in Hebrew!

Oswald smiled, and dropped a bombshell — he wasn't SS at all.

He explained.

When he left Cracow some time before on his way to Mir, he found

German papers lying in a bundle by the roadside. Of the German, there was no sign.

He picked them up, and suddenly realised the man described fitted himself perfectly. He was blond and tall — "Aryan". There was no reason not to use them. So he passed himself off as a German and joined an organisation of civilian helpers. Later he said, he told the authorities that his parents, now dead, were of German origin. They were impressed by the tall blond "Aryan" and he was recruited to the police. He was trained by the SS and because of his knowledge of local dialects, was promoted and appointed to Mir — as the police chief.

Now he said, he had been told to expect orders to terminate the Jews of Mir.

"Get friends, and be ready to join the partisans in the nearby forests. You have got to leave" he told Berl.

So, at night, the SS officer would come secretly into the ghetto, leave with Berl or his friend, Aron Koch or Shlomo Chayches, take a revolver or rifle, and instruct small groups of volunteers in the basics of hand-to-hand fighting.

AMONG the recruits, he met a young printer, Mike Breslin.

Soon, Oswald was officially informed of the forthcoming "liquidation" of the ghetto.

He moved fast. His instructions to the men he had trained secretly by night was that they must arrange a mass exodus of Jews to the nearest forest. In the meantime, in his SS status, Oswald proclaimed the ghetto to be of "useful Jews", arranged for work on the roads and enlarged the established workshops of craftsmen. It bought them time.

TO THE FOREST

THEN one Friday in August 1942, Oswald got his orders: "Destroy the ghetto, annihilate the Jews. All within a week".

Immediately he instructed the ghetto partisans to get people ready to leave on the



The Mirsky Castle. It was around the ruins of this ancient fortress that the Germans established the Jewish ghetto of Mir. LEFT: Father Daniel — Jewish partisan, ex SS-officer Oswald.



Sunday. They must move south towards the forest. He would take his police force towards the north in a false pursuit of Russian partisans.

In the ghetto the partisans tried to persuade others to come with them. Many refused, not believing the slaughter to come. The local rabbi, Eli Boruch, however, encouraged the young to go, although he, his wife and three small children remained. Some did not want to leave their parents; arguments, persuasion did not help. Only about 250, in small groups, left the ghetto to the Naluboki and Wolozin forests.

OSWALD INTERROGATED

BUT Oswald was in trouble. SS Divisional Headquarters in Branowicz were suspicious and a high ranking SS-officer arrived to interrogate Oswald. How could so many Jews just disappear into thin air? he was asked.

Oswald made excuses. But he knew his end — at the hands of the Gestapo — could be near.

Left alone in his office, he grabbed a gun and leaped through the open window into a nearby tall cornfield.

Although shot at and chased, he managed to reach a Catholic monastery on the outskirts of town, where nuns rushed to help him to hide.

A month later a par-

tisan, to whom Oswald had once given a pair of his boots in the ghetto, was found dead and disfigured after a skirmish with German police. The SS presumed Oswald dead and closed his file.

OSWALD — THE PARTISAN

IN the winter of 1944, a partisan named Ephraim Cinder met Oswald, who had had to temporarily leave the monastery — because police were making enquiries there.

He asked Cinder about the Jews in Mir. Ephraim brought him to the Russian command post in the forest. The Soviet interrogators did not believe Oswald's story and accused him of spying.

But Mike Breslin, who was at his camp, volunteered to defend Oswald and related his exploits with the partisans and Jews of Mir. Oswald was given an order to blow up a train with German soldiers on board. He did just that — proving that he was no spy.

OSWALD IS GONE

IN June 1944, the Red Army liberated Mir and Oswald was welcomed by the survivors. He stayed with Mike Breslin and others who came back to Mir from the forests.

But one day Oswald just vanished. Never to be heard from.

When Breslin settled in South Africa he learnt that Oswald had been seen in Cracow dressed as a monk.

In 1969 Breslin was invited to Israel to at-

As told to



XAVIER PIATT by



MIKE BRESLIN, a Capetonian who was a partisan in the forests of Eastern Poland.

of innocent men and women. Now, as a survivor of the Holocaust I make it my duty to see Oswald, a Jew at heart, — also a survivor — who kept his promise."