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Mark Kurzem, *The Mascot: Unraveling the Mystery of My Jewish Father's Nazi Boyhood*. New York: Viking, 2007. Pp. ix, 418. ISBN 978-0-452-28994-9.

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Mark Kurzem's *The Mascot* is an astounding and complicated tale of his Jewish father Alex's experiences as a "boy soldier" in the 18<sup>th</sup> Latvian Schutzmannschaft ("Schuma," or Police) Battalion during World War II, as well as their attempt to reconstruct the elder Kurzem's lost identity and birthplace. It is intended for a general audience with an interest in the Holocaust or Jewish history. Though not a professional historian, Kurzem studied at Melbourne, Oxford, and Tokyo universities, and formerly served as an international relations adviser to the mayor of Osaka, Japan.

Kurzem writes that his father always maintained that at the beginning of World War II he and his parents were Russian "pigherds," until one day, at age five, he became separated from his family. Alex wandered through the forest for several months, including throughout the severe Russian winter, until a Latvian police brigade found him outside a deserted Russian village in May 1942. The soldiers took him in and, because, according to Alex, the trauma of the forest had caused him to forget his name, re-named him Uldis Kurzemnieks. After an unknown period of time at the front, the unit's commander, Karlis Lobe, sent young Kurzemnieks (the name was shortened to Kurzem upon his arrival in Australia in 1949) to live in Riga, Latvia, with Jekabs and Emily Dzenis.

That story begins to unravel in May 1997 when Alex Kurzem leaves Australia and unexpectedly arrives at his son's residence in Oxford. During his visit, Kurzem tells his son he remembers a few things from before his time in the forest, in particular, two words "Koidanov" and "Panok," and expresses doubt about his past (18). He asks Mark to find out what these words mean because, "I want to know who I am. I want to know who my people are before I die" (20).

Soon after, Kurzem shows his son pictures of himself wearing a soldier's uniform and admits that the story of being found by the Latvian soldiers is not true. He recalls escaping his village during the night because his mother told him "We are all going to die tomorrow" (39). Furthermore, Alex claims he watched the execution of his family from a nearby hill and then retreated into the forest, where he lived by eating berries while keeping warm using a coat he took from the body of a dead soldier, until his capture by a peasant. Because he was believed to be Jewish, he was turned over to the 18<sup>th</sup> Schuma Battalion. Lined up to be shot along with other Jews, Alex escaped from the wall by yelling for bread and making the soldiers laugh, but was quickly captured by Sergeant Jekabs Kulis. Kulis confirmed that Kurzem was Jewish but persuaded the rest of the Latvian soldiers otherwise, saving the boy from execution. After approving his addition to the unit, Lobe presented Kurzem with his own uniform, the rank of private, and a pistol.

While on duty at the front, Alex Kurzem performed routine duties such as gathering firewood, entertaining the soldiers, and cleaning their boots. He also recalls war crimes: he

once watched his unit herd Jews into a synagogue and set it afire, an act the author suggests may be associated with the murder of Jews in Slonim, Belarus.<sup>1</sup> In another case, Kurzem implicates himself. While at Jekabs Dzenis's workplace, Laima Chocolates, he participated in a deportation of Jews from Riga. To entice the Jews to board the transport trucks that were going to take them to their fate, Kurzem gave them chocolates as they boarded.

Away from the front, Alex also served as a propaganda tool for Lobe, visiting hospitals and clinics and giving medals to wounded soldiers. A key component of his story is yet another memory—a German propaganda film about him shot at Lobe's home in Carnakava, Latvia. Eventually promoted to corporal by Lobe, Kurzem spent most of the war at the front with the 18<sup>th</sup> Schuma Battalion, with only occasional visits to Riga, until fleeing to Germany with the Dzenis family in October 1944.

Mark Kurzem writes of his father's story:

I was baffled about the fact that my father had remained silent for more than fifty years. What almost superhuman strength had this required? What toll had silence taken on his inner life? My father seemed to inhabit two separate worlds. In one, he was my father with an "official" history, an authorized and edited version of the past. But in the other world he was still largely a stranger to me: a boy-soldier, origins unknown, who was shunted about, wide-eyed, in one of the worst blood baths in recent history (117).

Angered by the comments of a "Professor M." at Oxford that his father's story was "altogether too implausible," Mark Kurzem determined to discover his father's childhood name and his birthplace, and to locate the propaganda film (169). Most of the last eleven chapters of the book are devoted to these searches, as well as to ascertaining whether Alex's memory of a burning synagogue packed with helpless Jews relates to the killings at Slonim.

With the help of Alice Prosser, a volunteer from an unnamed Holocaust center in Australia,<sup>2</sup> Kurzem discovered that "Koidonov" was actually the former name of present-day Dzerzhinsk, in Belarus.<sup>3</sup> Through a colleague in Minsk, Frieda Reizman, Prosser learned that Kurzem might have a family member living in that city. The publisher of Reizman's memoirs, Erick Galpern, was born in Dzerzhinsk and his father's family, including his eldest son Ilya, died in the liquidation of the village on 21 October 1941. Now Galpern's father, Solomon, had been a tanner in Dzerzhinsk and owned a house with an outside workshop, just as Alex had recently recalled in a dream. Furthermore, a photograph of Solomon Galpern, who survived both Auschwitz and Dachau and died in the 1970s, allegedly bears so strong a resemblance to Alex Kurzem that, so Mark Kurzem concludes, Alex's true pre-war identity must be that of Ilya Galpern. Undeterred by his mother's previous statements that his father had perished before October 1941, Kurzem suddenly recalls having seen his father leave the family home with two men *after* being told he was dead.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nachum Alpert, *The Destruction of Slonim Jewry: The Story of the Jews of Slonim during the Holocaust*, trans. M. Rosenfeld (NY: Holocaust Library, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Very likely the Jewish Holocaust Center in Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> According to evidence uncovered by Prosser, Koidonov was re-named *prior* to World War II. Why, then, did Alex Kurzem remember the former name of the village and not its name in 1941?

While in Dzerzhinsk, trying to find his boyhood home, Alex Kurzem is shown a house that Galpern claims was his father's former home, but has no recollection of it. In yet another strange twist, Mark Kurzem discovers through a conversation in broken English with local citizens that the house Galpern inhabited prior to World War II was in fact in another part of Dzerzhinsk. After searching that home, now owned by Dina Gildenberg, related by marriage to the Galpern family, Kurzem (again) suddenly recalls the floor plan of his boyhood home, including a curtain used to cordon off one section of it. Gildenberg's home has hooks to accommodate such a curtain, and neighbors report that Galpern did have an outside workshop before the war. While in the town, Kurzem visits Solomon Galpern's best friend from the war, Volodya Katz, who confirms that Ilya's best friend in Dzerzhinsk before the war was a boy named Panok. Furthermore, an unidentified citizen of Dzerzhinsk states that the execution of the Jews in the town took place over two days, not one, because a torrential downpour made the work of execution impossible, and the Jews were forced back into their homes. This is said to explain why Kurzem's mother told her son that she knew they were going to die the next day.

From Belarus, the Kurzems travel to Riga where Alex recalls every detail of the building where the Dzenis family apartment was located, as well as the location of Laima Chocolates and of the Dzenis summer home outside Riga in Carnakava, Latvia. While in Riga, Mark Kurzem, with the help of an archivist, "Miss Slavits," locates the propaganda film starring his father in the Latvia State Archive for Audiovisual Documents. The German narrator, according to Kurzem, clearly identifies his father as "the boy soldier."

The principal source for this book is Alex Kurzem himself. Although photographs and an index accompany the narrative, there is no documentation of research sources. Furthermore, the author has changed the names and identifying details of some individuals and organizations, even though he was under no apparent legal requirement to do so. It is, consequently, difficult to discriminate truth from embellishment or outright errors. The narrative is rife with amazing coincidences, and no documentation of any type substantiates whether Solomon Galpern was Alex Kurzem's father. However, among the book's twenty-eight photographs, Alex appears with Sergeant Kulis and others from the 18<sup>th</sup> Schuma Battalion in the autumn of 1943 and, fully armed, in what appears to be an SS uniform with several other soldiers near a train in an undated photograph. In a newspaper photograph dated 1943, Kurzem appears with Karlis Lobe and Jekabs Dzenis apparently visiting wounded soldiers. Another photograph shows Kurzem taking a break during the propaganda film. Also included is a still made from that same film after its discovery in Riga.

Apart from such photographic evidence, there is a disturbing lack of archival research. Mark Kurzem seems to have made no attempt to explore the records of the 18<sup>th</sup> Schuma Battalion held by the Library and Archives Division at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California; in fact, the author and his father dismiss them out of hand. According to Alex Kurzem, "They [the official records] may have been altered ... in order to protect the reputation of the eighteenth" (220), but no substantive reason is given for thinking this. These records could have helped establish, for example, the date when Kurzem became part of the unit as well as the possible location of the atrocity of Jews burned alive in a synagogue. According to historian Andrew Ezergailis, who has studied the records, the 18<sup>th</sup> Schuma Battalion likely did not engage in any killing in Slonim; if it had, this would be the only known

case of a Latvian Schuma battalion ordered to perform killings.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there is no attempt noted in the book to corroborate Kurzem's claim that his mother knew they were going to die the next day.

All this is not to say that the book is without value. Alex Kurzem's memories of the soldiers frequently using alcohol reinforces other research about the heavy use of alcohol by police battalions.<sup>5</sup> The book also shows Kurzem's range of emotions stemming particularly from survivor's guilt as well as a different type of guilt, that of a perpetrator: "Am I responsible, like the soldiers, for what went on? I don't know what to think. Those people in the yard at Laima were murdered, and I eased them on their way, not with a gun but with those damn chocolates. Even though I was only a child, I should have known. I must have blocked it out. It was only later that I understood what I had been party to" (135).

While the intriguing story told in *The Mascot* is partly supported by photographic material, Kurzem adduces far too little evidence to verify its major elements. The result is a book that readers must approach with extreme caution.

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944: The Missing Center* (Riga: Hist. Inst. of Latvia/Washington: U.S. Holocaust Mem. Museum, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).