

## The Mascot by Mark Kurzem.

Rider Books 2007.

This is probably the most extraordinary Holocaust story that I have ever read, and eloquent testimony to the truth that many have long suspected that the reservoir of Second World War memoirs is, as yet, far from exhausted.

The Mascot is two stories in one, and each carries the same level of importance and power. The Mascot is Alex Kurzem, a little Jewish boy aged about 5 from Belarus who escapes the liquidation of his community by running away to the forests. He survives there, in winter, until he is picked up by a Latvian police platoon who are acting as an Einsatzgruppe murdering Jews wherever they find them: their sergeant discovers that the boy is a Jew but keeps it from his comrades, and as the child is of Aryan looks they turn him into their mascot, even kitting him out with the first of a succession of uniforms that perfectly match their own. He witnesses several massacres, learns to shoot though never kills anyone, and ends up a poster boy for the Latvian fascist movement and the star of propaganda material.

As the Russians close in he flees with a Latvian family who have adopted him, first to British-occupied Germany, and then to Australia where he grows up, marries, and fathers three sons.

But in early old age, with only the battered brown suitcase that he has kept by his side since leaving Riga, he flies from Melbourne to Oxford to see his son Mark, and so begins the retelling of his story, of which his entire family were ignorant.

Mark Kurzem describes the voyage of discovery on which he embarked with his father, its many twists and turns and dramas, both practical and emotional, until the family journey to find the village where Alex's family was murdered and he was born, and also his real identity, for Alex Kurzem was not the name with which he was born.

This is a memoir of raw power, beautifully told, desperately sad, incredible and yet wholly convincing, and it is a powerful reminder that the victims of the Nazis came in many forms, and the trauma that they inflicted has crossed many generational boundaries.

The Mascot is a book that demands to be read, and once read the reader will find themselves changed in a most profound way.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh