

HANS KIMMEL

*How my family was affected by the
events of World War II*

Iliya Borecki

2008

Introduction

World War Two was a period of great disruption for people throughout the world. The War originally flowed from the political, economic and social problems of Germany after the First World War, which was a consequence of the harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles¹. These problems which faced Germany were blamed on the unpopular and unstable Weimar Republic which replaced the old German autocratic government causing Germany to search for alternative leaders. Adolf Hitler, an Austrian born failed artist and soldier, attracted many German supporters through his concept of National Socialism, which would rescue the *Fatherland* and bring Germany many years of power and glory as he saw his Germans as the 'master race'. Hitler brought forward many ideas for the German people in order for them to be a pure Aryan race. He would do this by conquering the land east of Germany in order for more *lebensraum* (living space) to live and work in. Hitler believed that the Jews, or Semites as he called them, were the greatest threat to the purity of the Germans. The Jews, as well as the political system of Russia (Communism) and also France needed to be destroyed as they were a threat to achieving 'the master race'. All of these concepts were described in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. Ultimately Hitler's beliefs were integral to the cause of World War Two which resulted in the deaths of 72 million people in total. Six million of these were Jews who were murdered in Europe, with 4,565,000 of them being Polish Jews.

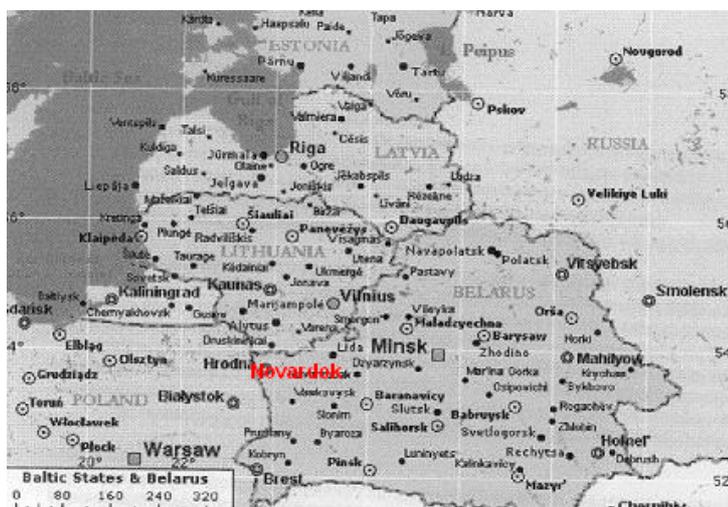
Almost all of my family, the Boretskys, who lived in the small town of *Novardok* in Poland and the neighbouring towns, were murdered by the Germans and their accomplices in World War Two.

The primary witness and the perspective of this paper of the Boretsky family is from that of my *Zaida Osher Boretsky* who was nine years old at the commencement of World War Two. As stated in the Bibliography on page 42, unreferenced quotations are sourced from the testimony given by Osher Boretsky.

¹ One of the peace treaties at the end of World War I. It ended the state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers and was signed on 28 June 1919

The *shtetl* Novardok & the Boretsky family

Novardok, also known as *Novogrudic*, was a *shtetl* situated about 150 kilometres from Minsk, 110 kilometres from Vilna, in Poland. Novardok can be traced back to the tenth century with the history of the Jews in Novardok spanning about 500 to 600 years. Originally Novardok was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth following the Union of Lublin in 1569 and in 1795 it was incorporated into *Grodno Governorate of Imperial Russia*² due to the Partitions of Poland. In the First World War, it was under German occupation from 1915 to 1918 and was occupied by the Polish Army at first, later the Red Army, during the Polish-Bolshevik war through February 1919 and March 1921³.

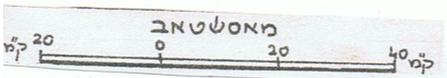
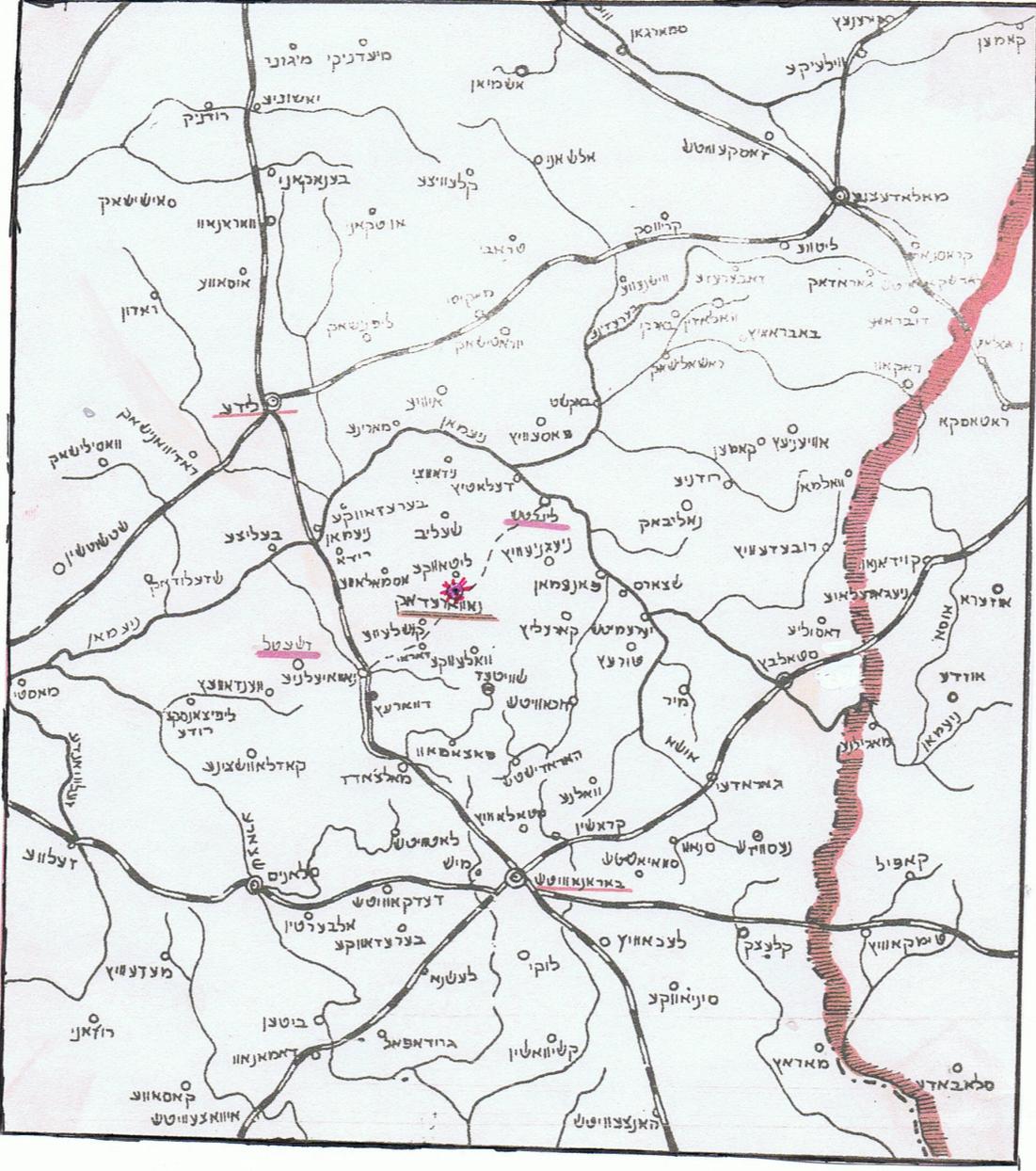


Location of Novardok in modern Byelorussia - 1994

² *Grodno Governorate* was a governorate of the Russian Empire. A governorate is a country subdivision. The governorate was formed in 1796 as *Slonim Governorate*, but only existed until December 12, 1796, when Paul I merged it with Vilna Governorate to form Lithuanian Governorate.

³ An armed conflict of Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine against the Second Polish Republic and the Ukrainian People's Republic (February 1919 – March 1921)

Map of Poland (now Byelorussia) and neighbouring towns of Novardok



Scale.

Key

- ⊙ towns.
- shtetles
- stations
- Poland-Russia border (1)
- small train lines
- places mentioned
- Novardok.

Map of Novardok and Neighbouring Towns (in Hebrew) 1939 from the Novardok Memorial Book

Novardok was returned to Poland by the *Treaty of Riga*⁴ in 1921 and like other countries across Europe was granted territorial and political independence as part of the treaties following the First World War. It was one of the first times in centuries that Poland had achieved its independence. As part of its guarantee of existence and support by other European states and the newly founded League of Nations all minorities had to be guaranteed protection and granted equal rights. For most minorities in Eastern Europe this was the first time that such rights had existed. Jews were no longer to be prevented from attending universities. They paid the same taxes as everyone else, and could not legally be punished because of their religion. This freedom allowed Judaism to thrive and Jewish history in the town of Novardok was very rich, Novardok was considered to be an 'important Jewish centre' as it was the birthplace of the Musar Movement⁵ and the hometown of Yiddish lexicographer Alexander Harkavy⁶.

According to Osher Boretsky, immediately prior to 1939 there were approximately "eight thousand Jews living in the town mostly living in poverty, but in harmony with the eight thousand other Poles and White Russians of the town". The town was "like a family, everyone knew everyone, and any quarrel or fight was quickly known throughout the town" although there were very few significant events which occurred in the town. People lived happily and comfortably in Novardok, even though it was considered to be a poor *shtetl*.

There was a Jewish area and also a Polish area in the town where the Poles and White Russians lived. These Poles did not get on with the White Russians who were "oppressed". According to Osher Boretsky the White Russians got on with the Jews, while the Poles had "hatred" towards the Jews. "Here and there they would beat up a Jew for no reason", but still the town was considered "quite liveable" and Jewish life was "blooming".

In the Jewish area there was a synagogue called the *Kliezel* that dates back to the 15th century. Novardok was a religious town with many Jewish schools such as the *Novardok Yeshiva*⁷, one of the biggest and most important Yeshivas in pre-World War Two Europe there was also a *Kollel*⁸ for

⁴ Signed in Riga on 18 March 1921, between Poland and the Soviet Union. The treaty ended the Polish-Bolshevik War.

⁵ Mussar movement refers to a Jewish ethical, educational and cultural movement, a "Jewish Moralistic Movement" that developed in 19th century Orthodox Eastern Europe, particularly among the Lithuanian Jews.

⁶ Alexander Harkavy was a Russian-born American writer, lexicographer and linguist who is partly responsible for the recognition of Yiddish as a language.

⁷ The yeshiva was established in 1896, together with a Kollel for married men, under the direction of Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, an alumnus of the Kovno Kollel and pupil of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. In the footsteps of his mentor, he was a staunch advocate of the Mussar approach.

⁸ A kollel (Hebrew: כולל; "a gathering/collection [of scholars]") is an institute for advanced studies of the Talmud and of rabbinic literature for Jewish men, essentially a yeshiva which pays married men a regular monthly stipend or annual salary (and/or provides housing and meals) to study Judaism's classic texts in depth.

married men, under the direction of Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, who was known as the *der Alter fun Novardok*, a Yiddish term meaning "the elder of Novardok". There were also many youth movements including *Betar*⁹ and *Hashomer Hatzair*¹⁰. Although Jewish life was "thriving" the Jews of the town were considered to be "second class" and were mainly workers, while there were some Jewish business people. The size of the community meant that some trades and professions were exclusively for the Jewish community, such as the kosher butchers and bakers.

Osher Boretsky stated that in the Novardok *shtetl* the Boretsky family lived in *Shenezitzer Gesseler*. Apparently the family's history dates back around two hundred years from 1939. In this residence lived Josef Boretsky, a boot maker, and his wife Mina (maiden name Bushel), with their five children, Moshe, Fruma, Fiver, Eli and Osher (my grandfather, my *Zaida*, the youngest of the family). The father of Josef, Dovid, was well-known in the town as a *melamed*, a wise adviser. Mina was trained as a tailoress but did not work as she stayed at home raising the children. Josef was considered a smart businessman and managed to purchase the house next door to their residence before Osher was born in 1930.

Like most of central and eastern Europe, religion was an important element in everyday life for the Boretsky family. Many Poles took their ethnic identity from their religion rather than their nationality and the concept of the nation state was still in its infancy in these regions. Ethnic Poles were Catholics, Byelorussians were Orthodox Christians and the Muslims still identified as Tartars despite settlement in the region for a number of centuries. The Jewish community was no different and considered themselves Jews foremost rather than Polish. In Novardok the Jewish community was divided between a number of synagogues, all orthodox but encompassing a range of political beliefs. The Jewish community lived under the religious guidance of a number of famous and influential rabbis.



Rabbi Moshe, Rabbi Yechiel Michl Epstein (1884-1908) and Rabbi Yitzchak Elkhanan Spector (1851-1864)

⁹ *Betar*: The *Betar* Movement (hebrew תיב"ר) is a Revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 in Riga, Latvia, by Ze'ev Jabotinsky.

¹⁰ *Hashomer Hatzair*: (Hebrew: הצעיר השומר, translating as The Youth Guard) is a Socialist-Zionist youth movement founded in 1913 in Galicia, Austria-Hungary.

The Boretsky family was somewhat religious and would go to synagogue every Friday night and *Shabbos* day, and would then meet every Saturday for a Shabbat lunch. The town also respected the Sabbath as shops would be closed on Friday evening until Shabbat had passed on Saturday night. The family also celebrated the Jewish festivals, and during Pesach they would make matzah. In 1939 Osher attended the *Heder*, a school where Jewish values were taught, for two years where he was taught to speak Yiddish and Russian.

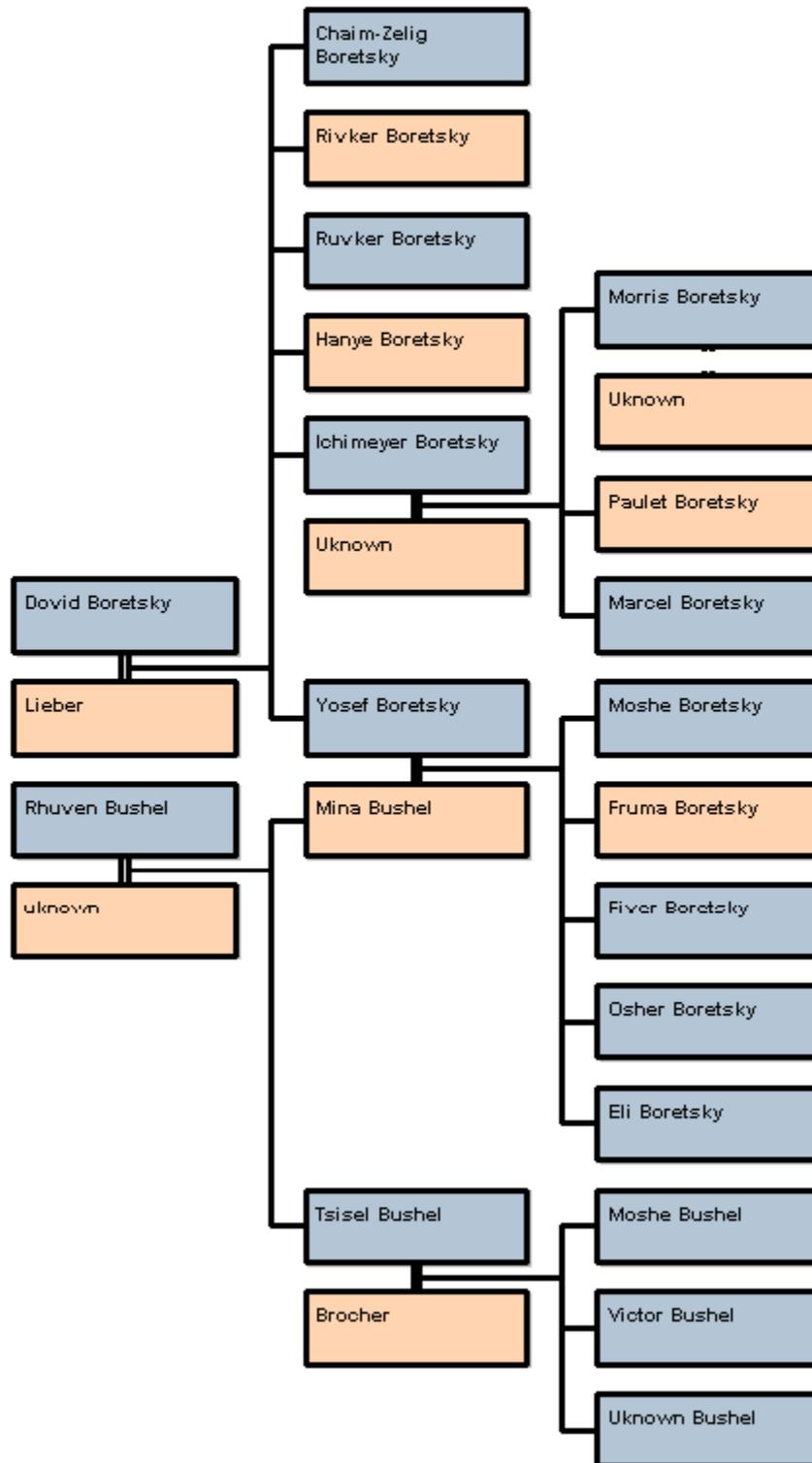


The Market Place of Novardok – circa 1930's



Eli Boretsky (centre) at the age of 11 or 12 playing the Mandolin with friends –circa 1939

Bushel and Boretsky Family before 1939





Osher Boretsky returns to the Boretsky lodgings in Shenezitzer Gesseler in 1994. The Boretsky family home was bombed and burnt down in the German bombing of Novardok

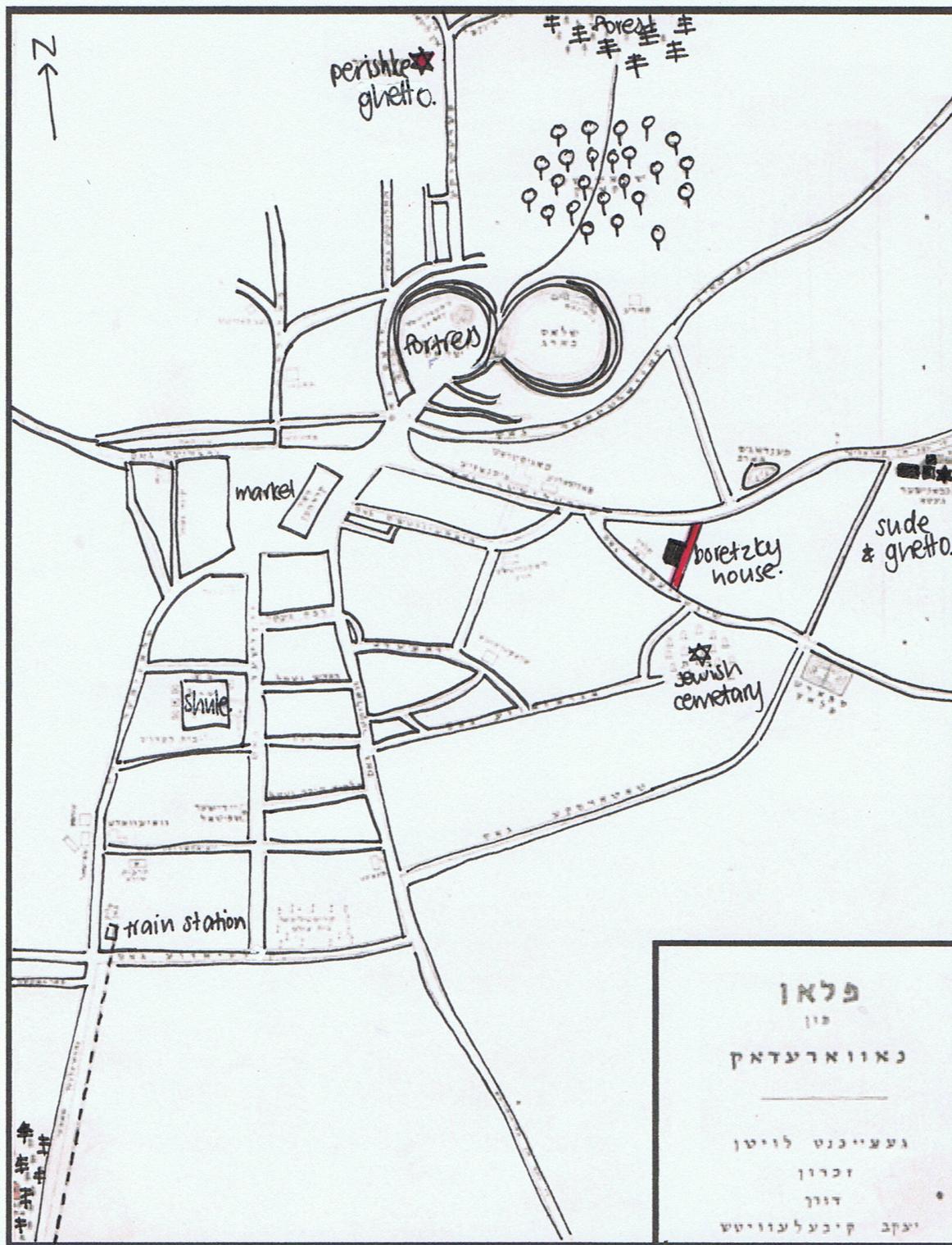


The backyard of the Boretsky property. This is the site of the original house which was burnt down in the German bombing. Only the original Boretsky cellar remains.



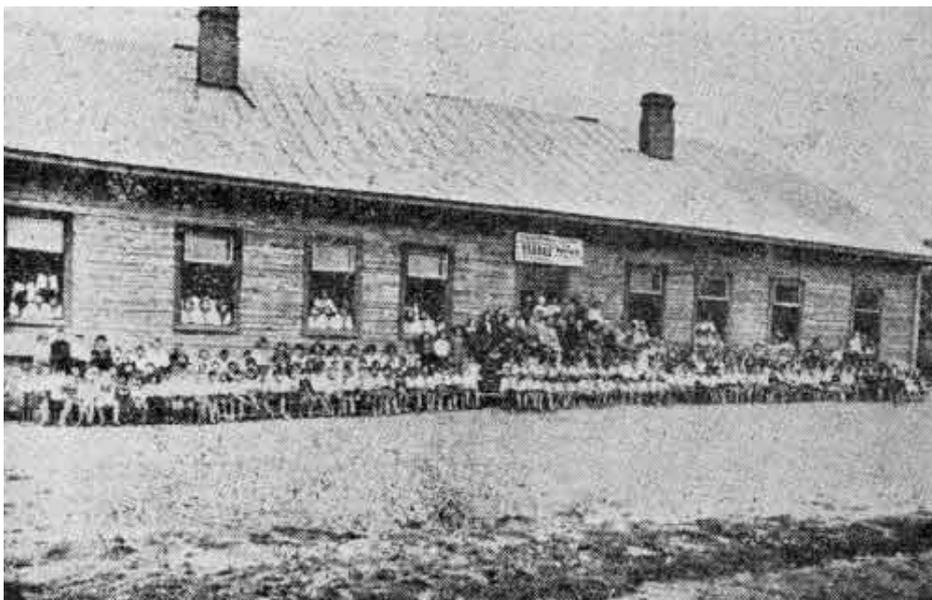
Scene of Shenezitzer Gesseler in 1994

Plan of Novardok



- up north is the 'Perishke' ghetto. ★
- train track - - - -
- eastwards shows the Sude and last Ghetto.
- the old Boretzky house.

At the beginning, the education in the schools was politically neutral but it became hard to maintain the peace in an ideologically stormy era around the globe. One Hebrew school was called *Tarbut* after the Hebrew poet C.N. Bialik. It was a day school with seven grades where pupils were taught in Hebrew except for the history and geography of Poland which was taught in Polish. Yiddish was also introduced from grade five. Subjects included History and Geography, Hebrew language and literature, *Mishna* and legends, nature studies, arithmetic and geometry, Yiddish, Polish, French, Music, Drawing, Agriculture and Craft.



Tarbut School – circa 1930's

Religious education in Novardok was rich and varied. The *Beit Yosef Yeshiva*, founded in 1906, was famous throughout the Jewish world. With independence from Russia, Jews in Novogrudek founded independent Jewish schools where the teaching language was Hebrew or Yiddish. The Hebrew school in Novogrudek was established in 1919.

There were new freedoms from the new Polish government for its minorities but with it went new responsibilities. Institutions and professions that had been excluded to Jews and other minorities were now open and Jews could serve in the police and armies of the region. As Polish nationals Jewish young men were expected to serve for a couple of years in the Polish Army as any other Polish citizen. Many Jews took a great pride in the opportunity to do this, allowing them to prove that they were loyal to Poland and its people. However, in many areas the prejudice of centuries remained and Jews were frequently intimidated during their time as soldiers.

The Jewish community of Novardok had suffered from the effects of the First World War. Many of the institutions within the Jewish community that had assisted the poor and desolate had collapsed

and a great many of its people were starving or living in extreme poverty. One of the immediate problems was the large number of orphans that existed. Over time and with outside assistance life for Jewish community gradually began to improve. Charitable institutions of support were created and trade was re-established. Much of the aid was sent from ex-townsmen and women who had found new lives for themselves in America. Under the leadership of Alexander Harcavy relatives and ex-citizens of Novardok in the United States raised a large sum of money for the community. Alexander Harcavy helped to write and advise on a constitution for the Novardok Jewish citizens and Democratic elections were held. All men and women over the age of twenty could vote and propose candidates to the Main committee and 15 subcommittees, eight for social help, six for cultural matters and one for justice (Bet Din).

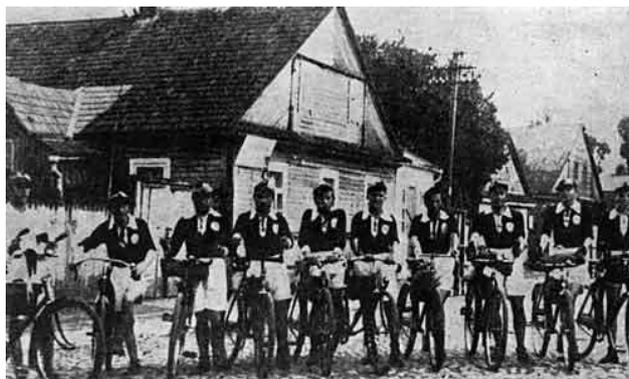
The Jews of Novardok displayed a variety of interests and activities in their communal life. The size of the community in the town allowed for a number of synagogues, divided predominantly amongst the various trades. The community reflected the diversity of political opinions and organisations throughout Eastern Europe. There were Communist, Socialist, Nationalist, as well as a number of Zionist groups. The town had a number of newspapers that were published in Yiddish, and a strong library. The town boasted a number of theatre groups, musicians, choirs, a fireman's band, and discussion groups.



Before the events of the Holocaust the town had three Jewish Newspapers



The Fireman's Band



Maccabi Cycling Team



Maccabi Football Team

There were also *Maccabi* sports associations, including a football team that played in the local league and a cycling team. *Maccabi* was a political youth group, formed to encourage Jewish youth to learn about politics, their Jewish identity and have fun.

As the 1930s progressed, the economic and political situation for Jews in Poland worsened and Jews became once more reliant on aid from overseas. Because of mass unemployment, trade schools were set up. Boys became apprenticed for three years to learn to become cabinet makers. Girls studied to become seamstresses for dresses, coats and corset making. For poor Jews evening classes were organized in Yiddish, Polish, and mathematics by teachers who volunteered their time.

The Commencement of World War Two

During Osher's first year at school, in August 1939 the Foreign Ministers of Germany and the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (USSR) met in secret and agreed to divide Poland in two, the eastern part to be absorbed by the Soviet Union and the western part by Germany. The agreement, known as *the Ribentrop Molotov Pact* was to come into effect if Germany invaded and occupied Poland. By the terms of this agreement Novardok was to become part of the USSR. On the 1st of September 1939 Nazi Germany attacked and invaded Poland on its Western border. This followed Hitler's long

rise to power in the Reichstag where he was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and Fuehrer in August 1934. Previous international agreements meant that Britain and the Western Allies declared war on Germany causing the commencement of World War Two. In response the Soviet Army crossed into the Eastern part of Poland and occupied Novardok on 17 September 1939 in accordance with the *Ribentrop Molotov Pact*. For Jews living in either Soviet or German occupied Poland life changed immediately and dramatically. In Novardok as across all the Soviet territories all Jewish institutions had to be closed. Hebrew was not to be taught anymore and Synagogues were shut down. Some of the leading Zionists and very wealthy Jews together with their families were arrested and sent to Siberia. The same happened to wealthy non-Jews or those who were suspected of being political opponents of Communism.

At the commencement of the German invasion of Poland in 1939 the Polish population called upon the Jews of Novardok to fight against the Germans together, even though it was evident to the Jews of Novardok that Poland was no match for the superior German army. The Boretsky family would often talk about the rise of Hitler and the strength of the German army. Yet they had faith in the Russians army as they believed the Russians “were capable to fight back”. During this time the family did not think about escaping as there “was no reason” and further “there was no where to go”. After four to five weeks after the commencement of the War in September 1939 the Germans had managed to occupy roughly half of Poland. Fortunately for the Boretsky family, Novardok was occupied by the Russians who the Jews of the shtetl believed would protect them. The Jews of Novardok felt relatively secure until the beginning of 1941. At that time many Jewish people managed to escape from Germany to Poland to tell of their life being under German rule. As news spread it then became known that large numbers of Jews were being executed. Upon hearing this news one important action Josef Boretsky took was to hide their gold pieces in the stove. This important step meant that the family had some hidden funds when desperately needed “before the ghetto and in the ghetto”.

However, “the Jews of the town were pleased with the Russians” (Soviet) occupation which made Novardok part of the Byelorussian SSR until 1941. The Jews “thought that the Soviets would bring justice” and would “protect” them from the Germans. The Russians made the Jews “feel equal” and made them “feel very free, freer than under the Poles”. That year many Jewish refugees fled from central Poland to Novardok and the Boretskys took in two of these “run away” Jewish families to live with them. The Boretskys shared their house with two of these families until 1941. During their stay these families informed the Boretsky family in great detail of what was going on in Poland with the German invasion and occupation and told them of anti-Semitic German activities.

There was also some degree of anti-Semitism during this time in Novardok. Some people labelled the Jewish premises with *Jude*, which meant bloody Jews, “This was the slogan at the time”. Osher Boretsky recalls that his father Josef Boretsky’s business suffered, along with other Jewish businesses, as some people were influenced not to buy from the Jews as they were considered “shrewd and conniving” and had “killed Christ”. However, during the Russian’s occupation in the town there were no fights and if anyone threw a derogatory comment towards a Jew the Russian law stated that they could be punished. Osher Boretsky later often stated that “Novardok’s two years of Soviet occupation rather than German occupation probably saved his life”. The Polish Jews under Soviet occupation were spared two years of murder and executions from the Germans, unlike the Jews in the remainder of Poland. For this the “Novardok Jews were fortunate”.

Operation Babarossa: Germany invades Russia & Soviet occupied Poland

The people of Novardok later also became victims of the German invasion and occupation when on 22nd June 1941 Germany declared war on Russia in what was known as *Operation Barbarossa*¹¹. In less than twenty-four hours it was known that the Russians were retreating, when the frontline was broken from as far as *Balistock* to *Latvia*. Many Jews escaped to Russia with the Soviet army, but the majority of Novardok’s Jewish population remained in Novardok. The town of Novardok was badly bombed and then burned during the German advance and Russian retreat, resulting in the death of fifty Jewish people.

The Jews of the *shtetl* all realised that if the Germans occupied Novardok then they would experience the same consequences that they had been told of by the German Jews who had escaped to their *shtetl*. This fear caused many people to attempt to flee to Russia. Three of the Boretsky children attempted to flee to Russia. Moshe, the eldest (aged twenty-one), Fruma (who was 16) and Eli (who was just 13) took food and their belongings to try and escape deeper into Russia, towards Minsk. Their parents Josef and Mina Boretsky openly quarrelled as to whether the family should be divided. Josef realised the danger and seriousness of the German’s invasion of Russia. He believed that the children should try to escape so “at least let them survive if they can survive”. However, five days later the family was reunited when the three children returned. The Russian army would not permit them to cross old border between Poland and Russia into the town of *Stolz*. The Soviet army confidently asserted to them that they would fight and defeat the Germans at the border.

¹¹ Operation Barbarossa: the codename for Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II that commenced on June 22, 1941. The operational goal of Barbarossa was the rapid conquest of the European part of the Soviet Union west of a line connecting the cities of Arkhangelsk and Astrakhan, often referred to as the A-A line.

On the 4th of July 1941, the German army entered Novardok. Almost immediately anti-Jewish laws were introduced and the lives of the Jewish people of Novardok would drastically change. Yellow Stars had to be worn on the front and back of all clothing. Jews were no longer allowed to walk on the pavement. Jews lost their rights to citizenship. All valuables like gold, silver, copper, fur coats had to be given to the Authorities. Every Jew from the age of twelve to sixty had to report for work.

Jews Regulation document: Circular Letter.

To all District Mayors, Commune Mayors and Village Elders

I am enclosing a series of wall posters concerning the confiscation of Jewish property. They are to be posted in sufficient numbers on sites which are clearly visible. The collection of Jewish property will take place on the 28.11.1941. On that day every Mayors office will each prepare one room, which will serve as collection point and will be occupied by two officials of the District of the Commissariat. For the preparation of those rooms, which must be neat and orderly the District Mayor is responsible.

To enable the Jews, who are ordered to hand over their possessions, to pass along the street to the district offices I am also enclosing pass forms. Those pass forms are to be handed to the Commune Mayors and Village Elders according to the numbers of Jews in their area. Jews, whose duty it is to hand over their possession, will report to the Commune Mayor or village Elder in order to obtain a pass form.

They will enter in the relevant spaces the name of the Jew to the place where he lives, the pass form must be returned to the village elder and must be handed on to the District Commissar via the Commune Mayor.

The Jews, who are with their possessions to be handed over, will assemble in the communes and villages and will march in close formation to the district town, under the supervision of the Jewish Council. After handing over their possession and valuables they will be led back, marching in close formation.

Every misuse of the pass forms or travel permit will be punished. The Jewish councils are responsible for this.

The district and Commune Mayors as well as the Village elders are responsible that all orders regarding the handing over the property of the Jews are carried out.

In the District Towns, the civilian police will line up the Jews in front of the District Mayors offices who will than be dealt with in alphabetical order.

Further two civilian policemen will be on duty in the collection point in case of special use.

Unpleasantness during the preparations for the handover, refusal to hand over or hiding of valuable items is to be reported immediately to the German officials.

Novogrudek, the 22 November 1941.

**Signed: Traub
District Commissar.**

Five days after the family's reunion there was another bombing which was concentrated in the Jewish area of the town. This resulted in the Jewish area of the town being up in flames with little consequence around the area occupied by the Pole and the White Russians. This action was seen by many of the townspeople as "the German's first anti-Semitic act towards the Jews" of Novardok as they understood that the German bombing was intentionally directly aimed at the Jews. After the Boretskys' house was burnt down from the bombing the family was left with nothing. They then moved with their neighbours until December 1941. Fourteen days after this bombardment the first German soldiers arrived in Novardok, who appeared to be front line battle soldiers. These Germans didn't treat the Jews 'too badly', yet occasionally a Jewish house was plundered with the theft of clothes and jewellery.

At that time food had already become scarce. Often Osher would sneak out and beg people he knew for bread and potatoes. Josef also continued to work as a boot-maker and in some instances was given food in return for his work. Osher recalls that the scarcity of food had already become critical and was desperately needed to provide the family with the sustenance so that "they could live and could survive".

A month after the German's occupation of Novardok, on 26 July 1941, the *Gestapo*¹², the "assassins", arrived declaring themselves "masters of the town". They took Jews for work in 'parties' with about forty Jews at a time, saying they were going to be taken to work in *Minsk* or another nearby city. However, the truth of their fate was that they were "digging themselves their own graves"; this occurred about four times a week. On some days the intellectuals of the town were taken, while on other days innocent youth were taken to be publicly shot in the centre of the town, "whoever was on the menu". Frenzy spread throughout the town, causing the Poles of the town to take it in their own hands to kill and steal from the Jews. A month after the *Gestapo's* occupation, Osher witnessed the *Gestapo* take fifty Jewish people into the centre of the town into the market square and kill them publicly, "so the whole town and the whole population could see their hatred towards Jews". Sometimes the Jews would be beaten up by non-Jews of the town. Osher once found himself in this position when his mother sent him into town to see someone and on the way some non-Jewish children attacked him, but luckily he was saved by a non-Jewish woman who told the boys off.

¹² Gestapo: (Geheime Staatspolizei: "Secret State Police") was the official secret police of Nazi Germany. Under the overall administration of the Schutzstaffel (SS), it was administered by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) ("head office of the Reich's security service") and was considered a dual organization of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) ("security service") and also a suboffice of the Sicherheitspolizei (SIPO) ("security police").



The main square in Novardok where the Jewish people were shot & publicly hanged – Osher Boretsky returns to Novardok in 1994

Stories spread to Novardok from twenty surviving Jews from the town of *Hordish* who told of their town being massacred with the entire population being wiped out by a special squad. The survivors told of how the Germans circled the town and ordered all the Jews to the market place in the centre of the town where they were killed which strangely provided entertainment for the rest of the town. The Jews called these massacres *shvitas*. Fortunately they had yet to occur in Novardok. So the people of the town continued to work and live life as normally as they could. Hoping and praying that they may be spared a *shvita*.

The Germans soon became more demanding in Novardok. They insisted on forty to fifty Jews to work for them free of charge. In response to this the Jews formed a *Yudenrath*¹³, a Jewish Council, who would select the Jews that were to be sent to labour, that were usually to be beaten up and kicked around. The *Yudenrath* consisted of ten people, the leaders of the town. Even though these people helped Germans they later shared the same fate as all the other Jews of the town, when they were treated like any other Jew and killed. Once the Jews of Novardok had heard that on the 8th of December 1941 the *Yudenrath* was to provide workers to make two big holes about five kilometres out of the town, 10 metres by 3 metres with a depth of six feet. The Jewish people of the town discussed this news hoping to interpret that it meant no danger to them and that the holes may be for German military purposes. However, Josef Boretsky understood that the holes would be for Jews. During this time the Germans put up signs, saying Jews that attempted to escape would be killed. That Saturday morning all the Jews did not attend synagogue, and instead stayed at home waiting to be told what was happening while the non-Jewish population had been given orders to not walk in the street.

A few hours later a member of the *Yudenrath* came to *Kerlich* Street, where the Boretskys were living after their house had been bombarded, and told them to go to the *Sude*, the courthouse,

¹³ *Yudenrath*: German for "Jewish council" - administrative bodies that the Germans required Jews to form in the German occupied territory of Poland, and later in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. The Judenrat served as a liaison between the German occupying authorities and the Jewish communities under occupation

which was one kilometre away. The other Jewish families became disillusioned; they hid under beds, in closets while the “smartest and more clever ran away to Christian houses to live in their barns or gardens”. Yet the Boretskys followed orders and made their way to the *Sude*, which consisted of three big buildings, the first building was three storeys high and had about six rooms on each floor while the two other buildings were on one floor and consisted of two large rooms. At this time Novardok had a population of about seven thousand Jews, but only four thousand Jews who were workers were told to go to the *Sude* with their families. The Boretsky family were initially relieved when they were instructed to go to the *Sude*. However this feeling of relief very quickly vanished when the whole family witnessed Josef Boretsky being beaten with a whip by Commander Reuter when he merely asked a question in German as he entered the *Sude* with his family. Nevertheless Josef believed that his family were “the lucky ones” as the family remained intact and together. That evening it was discovered that Jewish people were crammed into all the buildings of the *Sude* and that Mina’s brother, Tsel, was in another building. The family visited him and when they departed Osher witnessed his mother shaking her brother’s hand and wishing him long life “as it was written on their faces that they could smell death and that something drastic was going to happen”.



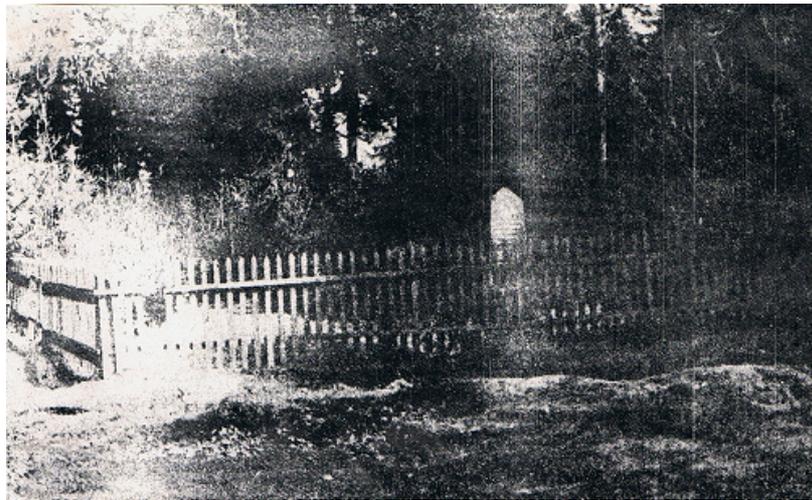
The back of the Sude courthouse - 1994



The front of the Sude 1994



The sleeping quarters in which the Boretsky family slept – 1994



The 'Brother Grave', the mass grave of the first execution

The following day, a Sunday, the Germans selected the “useful people” by asking everyone their professions. If they were not a worker they would be sent away, and if they were a worker like Josef they “would be sent to the side of life”. Josef planned to separate the family during the selection as he felt that the family may be too big to survive the selection. Moshe (the oldest brother) was told to take a Jewish German woman (who had run away from Poland) and claim that she was his wife and that they were both tailors by profession. When the German Officer approached Josef he said that he had only two children, Osher who was eleven at the time and Fruma who was eighteen. Eli and Fiver were both standing aside, so that they weren’t noticed by the Germans. Later Josef told the Officer that he “forgot to declare his children”, and without the Officer realising he had another two children with him. The Officer then agreed to let the Eli and Fiver through. Later that morning “the un-useful ones” were sent out of the *Sude* and were forced into trucks. The Boretsky family along with the one and a half thousand “useful Jews” heard their neighbours’ and friends’ screams as they entered the trucks and also the firing of the rifles that went on for about five hours. As the trucks were being loaded with Jews for certain execution Osher witnessed the Jews knowingly going to their death. Men, women and children cried in disbelief while some of them shouted to those remaining Jews inside the *Sude* “*nakoma*” (you must revenge my death). As a result of Josef’s quick thinking his whole family managed to survive the first execution which killed approximately two thousand Jews. This left just twelve full families of Jews in the whole town.

The following day, a Monday, the guards in the *Sude* vanished, leaving rumours to emerge that the Germans were creating a ghetto. This proved to be true when about two days later the remaining one and a half thousand “useful Jews” were forced to move to the poor part of town known as *Perishke* and live in the ghetto, “which was made up of about twenty houses”. In each house lived about two hundred people in extremely cramped and squalid conditions. The ghetto was encircled

by walls made of timber that had barbed wire underneath and above and was guarded by Jewish policeman, *Kapos*¹⁴, who would ensure that no Jew escaped.



The entrance to Perishke ghetto - 1994

During the day the people in the ghetto old enough to work were sent to the *Sude* to work as labourers while being rewarded with tiny rations of bread and food. Josef worked in the *Sude* making boots for the German soldiers, Moshe, Eli and Fiver worked making coats for the *Gestapo* while Fruma worked as a tailoress. Osher was too young to work and had to stay in the ghetto all alone, sometimes he would sneak out to visit his Polish friends and obtain food, but was instructed, along with his brother Eli that they were “not to take the food inside the ghetto, because the Germans would search you and beat you up if they found food”. However, Eli took no notice of this and got caught smuggling food and was beaten up as a result. Eli cried while his mother refused to weep as “she couldn’t give the Germans the satisfaction of seeing an old lady cry”. Many of the children that were between the ages of thirteen and fourteen pretended to be older so that they could go into the city to occupy themselves. Occasionally Osher would do this, and would either clean bricks or visit his father in the *Sude*. There were sometimes stories of people escaping the *Sude*, like the eldest Boretsky son, Moshe, who escaped from the work detail with some of his friends, but while they were fleeing some of his friends got killed so he returned to the *Sude* with a revolver that he had bought. Upon his brother’s return Osher heard stories about partisans and in particular the *Bielskis* Partisans from *Stankievichy*¹⁵ who had a force of about fifty men.

In the ghetto there was a soup kitchen and sometimes the workers who would line up by the gate each morning would collect potatoes and bread from the market, while people could also exchange

¹⁴ Kapos: trustees carried out the will of the Nazi camp commandants and guards, and were often as brutal as their SS counterparts. Some of these Kapos were Jewish, and even they inflicted harsh treatment on their fellow prisoners.

¹⁵ Stankievichy is situated near Novardok, an area that at the beginning of WWII was under Soviet control.

objects for food. Each night in the ghetto there was a minyan, where everyone whom attended recited *Kaddish* for family members recently murdered by the Nazis. Following the minyan the men would discuss problems, rumours, stories from the front and ways to escape. As a child Osher recalls the varied and heated discussions as whether the Germans winning or losing the war, “winter life wasn’t so bad and there hadn’t been rumours of another execution” and that “maybe the Jews alive now, will stay alive”. In August of 1942 the Germans were advancing toward the town and were ambushed by a group of partisans. This hit fortunately delayed the next impending execution. However it did confirm the rumours that another execution was imminent.

There was much discussion of the delayed execution which made Osher realise that if he remained in the ghetto he’d be killed. So he decided to escape into the forest, where he survived on his own for just over a month. Osher pretended to be a non-Jewish orphan. He would often try to stay with non-Jewish peasants overnight as they felt “pity” when they saw him. However during his time nothing had changed in the ghetto, so Osher returned to his family and lived in the ghetto for another five weeks.

The Boretsky family remained for seven to eight months in the ghetto in total, until the summer of 1942, in August, when rumours had spread one Friday night that trenches had been dug about three kilometres from the town. This caused much heated discussion within the ghetto as some argued the “holes are not for us, they are for military purposes” while others argued correctly that the pits were for them when a second execution occurred on the 7th of August 1942 when 5,500 Jews were taken from the ghetto and shot in *Litovka*, an area approximately 1.5 kilometres from Novardok, near a lake. Some Jews attempted to flee, but there was nowhere to go as it was winter and was snowing. There was no hope for the Jews imprisoned in the Ghetto as their Christian neighbours and former friends offered no assistance. Panic spread throughout the ghetto as it was surrounded by local Russian police as the local population watched with interest outside the Ghetto fence.

Osher and his father Yosef sensed the “tension” and danger escalating day by day in the ghetto. As during the day the Ghetto was only occupied by young children and non workers. Yosef came to realise that these defenceless people were very vulnerable to execution while the family was away working in the *Sude*. During August 1942 Yosef took Osher to his work in the *Sude* and made him hide in the gutter on the roof of the three storey building of the *Sude* while his family was at work. Osher was ordered by his family not to reveal himself on the roof until Moshe called out to him his mothers maiden name “Bushel”. However no one came to retrieve him that night. Osher sensed something was wrong and sensed the “smell of death”. This “smell took over” him and he left his

hiding place to figure out a way of escaping from the roof. Looking down he noticed that the Russian policeman took about five minutes to circle the perimeter of the building. So while the Russian policeman was on the opposite side Osher slid down the gutter “like a monkey” and didn’t even think about the danger involved in climbing down a gutter from a three story building.

When Osher reached the ground he again escaped to the forest. As he was fleeing he considered visiting his Uncle in *Lida*. Osher casually walked to a village situated a few kilometres from Novardok and lay down in a field and “slept like a dead person”. When he awoke the following morning he pretended to be a happy gentile child again. He asked for directions to his Uncle’s town, saying that his father was there on business. When Osher arrived at yet another ghetto he saw the Russian policemen and Jewish workers behind the fence. Osher told one worker his name in Yiddish and asked to see his Uncle. When Osher was reunited with his Uncle he asked him if he could join him on the other side of the fence in the *Lida* ghetto. To his amazement, his Uncle told him very aggressively to “go away”. Osher refused to leave and his own Uncle smacked him with his stick, telling him to go away because both of them would be killed. Osher was deeply hurt by his uncle refusal to help him. He walked away, knowing that he would have to survive on his own, which gave him some sort of courage. Two days later Oscar discovered the whole of *Lida* had been gassed by the Germans who threw canisters of poison gas into the ghetto.

A few days after the news of his Uncle’s execution Osher had heard that the *Perishke* Ghetto in Novardok had been encircled and there was another execution. After Jewish workers left to go to work in the *Sude* the 1,800 Jews remaining in the Ghetto were executed. These unfortunate (non working) Jews left in the ghetto were lined up in rows and were made to walk about one kilometre from the ghetto to the execution place, where they were told to run and were shot. They were placed in trenches that they had been forced to dig for themselves. The second execution left approximately six hundred Jews remaining in the *Sude* and approximately one hundred Jews in the *Perishke* Ghetto. Upon hearing this Osher returned back to Novardok to discover that his family was the only full family remaining in the town to survive the executions. On his return to the ghetto his father berated him as he was “not to return because it was too dangerous”. However he did uncover some news on his siblings, that his brother Moshe was preparing to leave to join the partisans with the woman he claimed to be his wife and that his sister Fruma had gotten married and already left the ghetto to join the partisans.

Final escape from the *Perishke* Ghetto & to the Jewish *Bielski* Partisans

Osher remained in the *Sude* with his family until it was discovered that on the 4th of February 1943 the last people in the ghetto were going to be executed. His father then told him he must again go away. His father knew that “this was the end of the game” and that there was no chance for the whole family to survive and that it “would be good for at least someone to survive”. Josef reiterated what he had already told Osher that he was to “leave the ghetto” but this time “not to come back” as he had realised that there was no hope for the family in the ghetto.

It was agreed one day that when Eli went looking for potatoes he was going to flee with Osher. That day Osher waited for his brother as agreed, but he never arrived. As Osher was waiting he found the perfect opportunity as there were no policeman passing he escaped without his brother. That day in April 1943, in the crisp spring of Novardok, Osher walked out of the ghetto smiling, pretending to be a non-Jewish child while jumping past the guard into the forest, on what would be the last occasion he would ever see his parents. Osher was free, and as he felt “it was up to him to survive”. Once Osher passed the fence of the ghetto with each step towards the woods he sensed he had hope and life was possible. Within a few steps his fear turned to relief and then hope and joy.



The spot in the forest where Osher waited for his brother Eli in April 1943 – photo taken in 1994

Osher continued walking like a happy child into the forest and waited for his brother. Osher met a boy he knew and they waited for Eli together. After waiting for a long time Eli never arrived so Osher and this boy walked around Novardok in search for a woman that his friend said he knew. When they both arrived at the woman’s house she shouted at them. Osher “sensed danger” so he walked away to be on his own again. All Osher knew was that he had to go further into the forest as he felt “safer” there. While walking through the forest he saw murdered Jewish people, at first he

felt “heartache” but he became so used to seeing dead bodies he did not let it get to him as his will to survive was too strong.

Osher settled that night in a barn, and slept with a horse that he became friends with as he “saw him as not being his enemy”. Everyday Osher’s will to survive grew stronger and even though he thought about his parents he realised “there is such thing as death” and that he “had the opportunity to live”. Osher grew to understand that “non-Jews recognised Jewish children by their eyes, their walk and their sadness”, so he continued playing his “game” and acted like a non-Jew. Osher became very good at this game until a group of shepherd boys came up to him and one boy accused him of being a *jid* (derogatory for Jew). Osher laughed back at him and accused the shepherd boy of being a *jid* himself, the shepherd ran away crying as the other boys laughed at him. Later the shepherd boy returned with his friends who accused him of being a Jew again. Osher defended himself once more and accused the shepherd of being a Jew another time, which provoked his friends taunting him by calling him a Jew, which convinced them that Osher wasn’t a Jew. Osher continued his act and told them that the shepherd was a “bloody stinking Jew” and acted as if he hated Jews. However, Osher became very weary of the consequences of this encounter. That night he decided to return to the peasant woman’s lodging much later than usual. When he returned the peasant woman told him with tears in her eyes that the councillor wanted to see him. Osher knew that his “time there was over”.

That night Osher moved on to another *footer* farmhouse. Osher came to realise that he could pretend to be a gentile orphan shepherd boy. He would “pretend” that his “parents were killed in the German bombing”. Often he himself did not know if the peasants believed him or not but he came to very carefully assess the people he came into contact with – whether they were a possible threat and whether or not they could be trusted. At night sleeping in the barn he would “listen very carefully to the conversations between the husband and wife” whether there was any animosity or hostility towards him. He would “even go to church with the peasants” where the Priest would sometimes wink at him as if he knew the truth. But Osher became “wise enough to avoid towns, villages and roads” where he might encounter German soldiers or hostile villagers. He often searched for a *footer* which was a lone farmhouse in the forest. In this way fewer suspicions may be aroused and if necessary he could make a quick and safer exit.

Osher later found out that on the 7th of May 1943, 250 workers in the *Sude* of Novardok were separated. The remaining workers were shot in *Hardzilovka* less than a kilometre away. Of the

remaining 250 workers, eleven were deported to a concentration camp, *Koldichevo*, while others managed to escape from the camp. At this time the war had turned for Germany, they had received terrible defeats in the Soviet Union. The Russians had won the battle of Stalingrad, yet the execution of Jews was continuing unabated.

The remaining workers in the *Sude* were put on starvation rations during the spring of 1943 while a plan was devised to break out of the camp by tunneling 250 meters to the other side of the barbed wire into a field of growing wheat. Work started on the tunnel in June and by September 1943 it was declared ready. On the 26th of September 1943 some of the workers in the *Sude* assembled at about eight o'clock that evening and two hundred and thirty Jews successfully escaped.



The Sude, and the escape route - A photograph taken of a model in the Imperial War Museum, London.

While Osher did know what had happened to his family and of the fate of the people in Novardok he continued to survive on his own. Each night Osher would stay with various gentiles as he heard rumours that some Jewish children had been handed in by peasants and murdered by Germans in exchange for a bag of salt. Osher made contact with some peasants that knew about the *Bielski Partisans* and was told to go to *Koslovsky*, a man who apparently was in contact with the *Bielski Partisans*. *Koslovsky* lived about twelve kilometres from the *Naliboki Pusha* (forest) where the partisans were said to be located. These partisans were formed by four brothers, Tuvia, Alexander Zisel "Zus", Asael and Aharon. They came to realise that their best chance of survival was in the forest as their village, *Stankievichy*, was taken by the Germans after *Operation Babarossa* on the 22nd of June 1941. Tuvia was the eldest Bielski brother took the role of commander of the group, as he was previously a Polish army veteran who had strong Zionist thoughts. He grew up as a member of the Zionist youth movement.



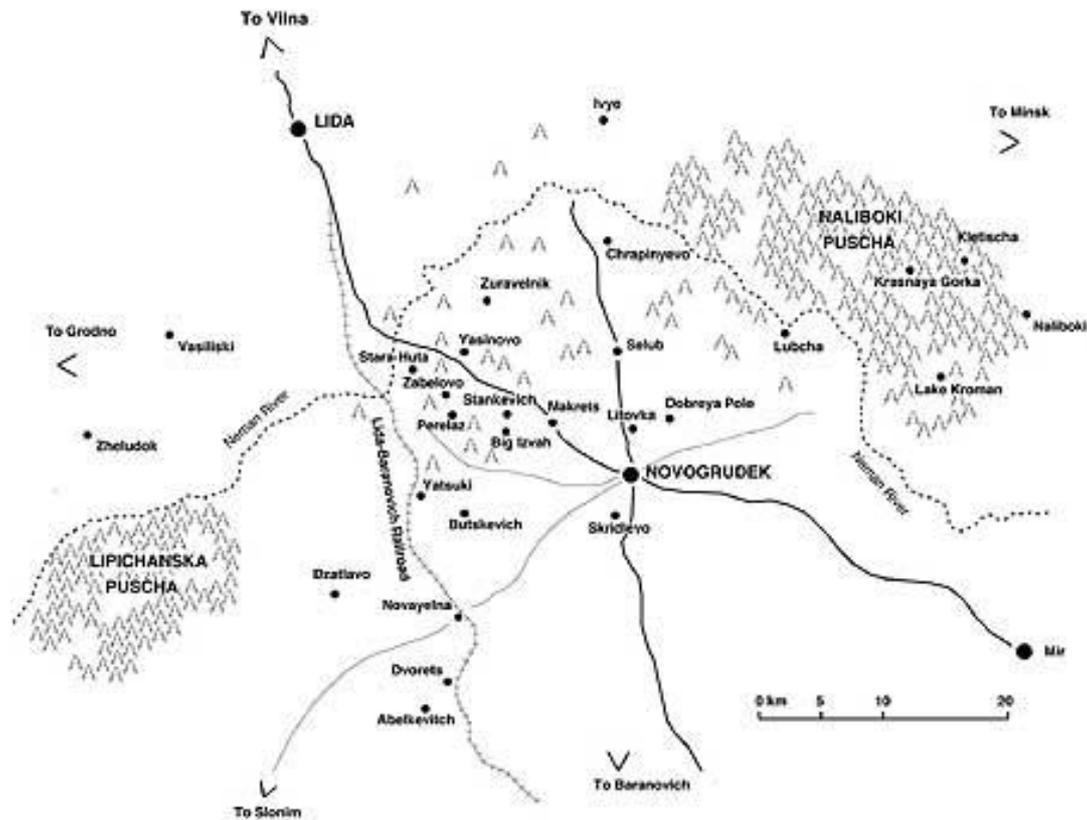
Tuvia Bielski, Asael Bielski and Zus Bielski- the leaders of the Bielski Partisans



Konstantin Koslovsky



A photograph of Osher as a Partisan – 1943



A map of the location of Novogrudok and the Naliboki Forest

When Osher met with *Koslovsky* he lied to him telling him that he had a brother that was a member of partisans that would collect him. Osher told this lie to *Koslovsky* as he knew that he couldn't rely on anyone, and that *Koslovsky* would not report him if he knew he had a brother in the partisans that would kill him if his brother was killed. Early in the morning Osher was taken to a small forest where he was provided food. On his fourth night in the forest another boy arrived, Yudel Slutski, whom he befriended. On Osher's sixth night in the forest the Partisans found him and accepted him into their group where he was reunited with his sister Fruma. Osher felt instantly safer with the partisans as he witnessed Jews with rifles "fighting back". At the time Osher joined the partisans there were only two hundred and fifty Jewish partisans. The partisans were equipped with some machine guns and grenades that they sourced from villages from where the Russians retreated and from the Germans which the Partisans killed.

The Bielski Partisans "threatened to burn down the house of anyone who failed to tell the partisan group of a Jew who was looking for them" and they "never turned anyone away, including the sick, elderly and children. Those who could not fight cooked and fixed clothes". The motto of Tuvia was that he "would rather save one old Jewish woman than kill ten German soldiers" and this made the group "like a family". The Partisans "lived in a village-type atmosphere" and they all "lived in small

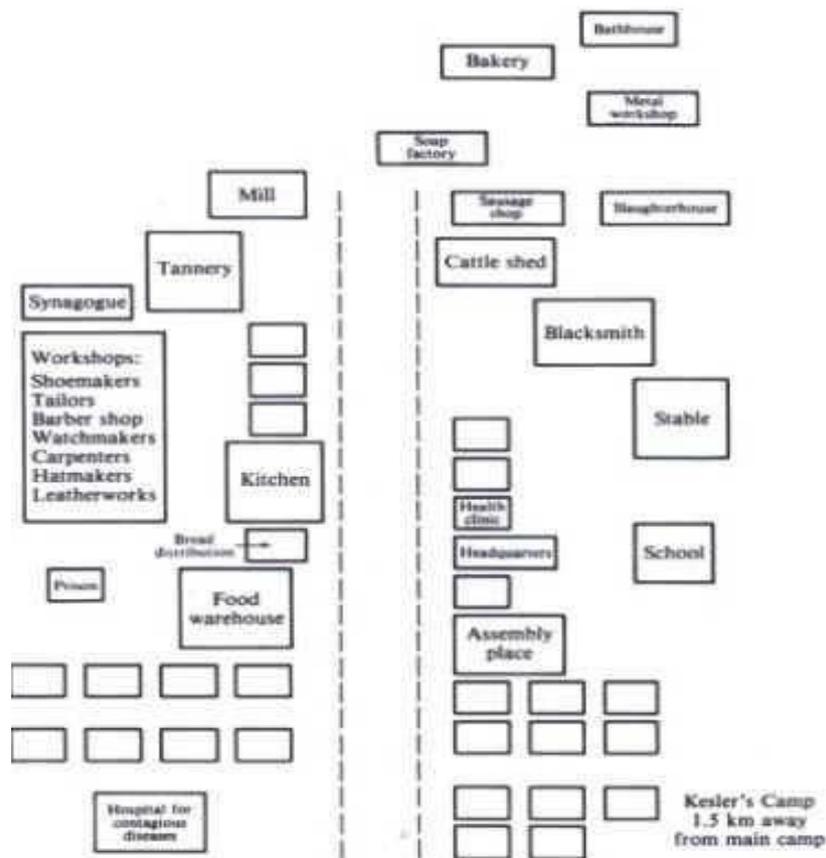
group which were organised by the head office”. If the Germans ever hunted the group they would move to another are of the forest.

The partisans would live in “an underground village” and sleep in *zemlyankas*, bunkers in the ground that were camouflaged, which was sometimes referred to as “Jerusalem of the woods”. The village had several utility structures: a kitchen, a mill, a bakery, a bathhouse, a medical clinic for sick and wounded and a quarantine hut for those who suffered from infectious diseases and even had herds of cows that supplied milk. Artisans also produced goods and carried out repairs, providing the combatants with logistical support that later served the Soviet Partisan units in the vicinity as well. More than a hundred people worked in these workshops, they repaired old clothing and stitched together new garments, made and fixed shoes, produced belts, bridles, and saddles, there was also a metal shop that repaired damaged weapons and constructed new ones from spare parts. Carpenters, hat-makers, barbers and watchmakers also served in the makeshift village. The camp even had its own jail and a court of law.



A photograph of a group of armed Partisans in 1943

Map of the Bielski Otriad in Nalibocka Forest
 During the Last Phase of Its Existence
 (Fall 1943–Summer 1944)



The partisans would usually operate at night, while the two dozen children attended school during the day. Yet Osher volunteered “to take revenge on the Germans” instead of attending school and would be sent on dangerous missions during the day, acting as a courier. Occasionally Osher would be sent to a village to collect a horse. He would not be harmed by the peasants as they feared that if they harmed him the partisans would take revenge on them. However there were times that a peasant did not agree to give up their horse to Osher and Osher would be threatened by the peasant; as on one occasion a peasant threatened Osher with an axe until the peasant’s wife counselled the peasant as to the consequences of harming a partisan. The Bielski Partisans understood that it was important for them to survive and have supplies from the local population, so that the local population must fear them more than they fear the Nazis. As a result peasants who betrayed the Bielski Partisans were murdered and their burnt down. At these extreme times ultimately such extreme measures proved effective.

Sometimes Osher was sent to the mill to bring back flour and on one occasion he saw German trucks approaching. He bravely waved hello to them, and “played silly” by telling them that his father sent him to the mill. The German officer briskly departed due to Osher’s naive outgoing attitude.

Life with the Bielski Brothers

Jackie Erenboim

AT 13 years of age, Oscar Borecki was the youngest member of the Bielski Brothers partisan group — believed to be the largest Jewish partisan group in war-time Europe.

Speaking to the *Australian Jewish News* after the recent screening on SBS of "As It Happened: The Bielski Brothers", Mr Borecki is the only surviving partisan in Sydney.

As a child in the ghetto at Novograd in Belarus, he had heard rumours about the existence of a large Jewish partisan group. Aware that inevitable death awaited him if he remained in the ghetto, the young boy fled, with the blessing of his father, into the forest.

He travelled to Stankewicz, where he knew that the Bielskis based their operations and had a strong sphere of influence. He arrived in April 1943 and approached a contact, who informed the Bielskis of his desire to join the resistance.

"The Bielski Brothers threatened to burn down the houses of anyone who failed to tell the partisan group of a Jew who was looking for them," Mr Borecki said. "They never turned anyone away, including the sick, elderly and children. Those who could not fight cooked and fixed clothes."

The partisan group was "like a family", he said. "We lived in underground bunkers. There was a village-type atmosphere. We lived in small groups, which were organised by the 'head office'. When the Germans hunted us, we moved to another area of the forest.

"The brothers kept me and conditioned me when I first arrived. Later, I was sent on different jobs — taking horses to the village, taking grain to the mill, smelling out the village. I didn't look typically Jewish, so I was used as a scout. My luck was that I was a child and not seeing



Oscar Borecki (left) at a reunion of Bielski Brothers partisans in Israel in 1982. Tuvia Bielski is on the far right; he died a month after the photograph was taken.



Oscar Borecki, aged 14, after the war.



Oscar Borecki this week.

the executions that had taken place in Novogrudok gave me the opportunity to do what I was told. I could act. I didn't have sad eyes; I didn't show that I was a Jew through my eyes. The Gentiles couldn't report me to the Germans because they knew that if they did, the Bielski Brothers would destroy their houses."

Mr Borecki said he met the eldest Bielski, Tuvia, who commanded the fighting forces, on several occasions. "He was a brave, dynamic person, a good speaker and aggressive. I wouldn't dare come back without fulfilling an order."

This vitality and strength enabled the brothers to build up a resistance force of 1200 people, he said. They built schools, bak-

eries and kitchens, manufactured ammunition, uniforms and shoes for their own purposes and built a tunnel from which 250 Jews crawled to the forests and safety from a forced labour camp in what became one of the most successful escapes of Jews in occupied Europe.

In June 1944 the Russians liberated Novograd. After travelling to France, Mr Borecki arrived in Sydney in 1951. He has kept in touch with other survivors and has participated in a number of reunions, the most recent in 1992. The group has funded the building of monuments in Novograd, where mass executions took place, and is currently funding the building of a wall around the Jewish cemetery in Novograd — the only remaining symbol of *Yiddishkeit* in the town.

Liberation: May 1944

Osher recalls that just before liberation in the middle of 1944 the Germans were retreating as the Soviet Army was approaching. The Partisans attempted to ambush the Germans, and Osher, being a curious thirteen year old, ran towards the front to see what was happening, prior to the commander instructing the men to withdraw. This failed Partisan ambush resulted in the death of twenty partisans just four days before liberation, in the summer of 1944.

By the beginning of 1944 the German Army was in retreat in Eastern Europe as they were losing the war. However, throughout Europe they continued to round up Jews and murder them, mainly in the extermination camps in occupied Poland. In June 1944 the *Allies*¹⁶ opened up a second European front with the Normandy landings. Nazi Germany was now being attacked on both sides. Despite this in the summer of 1944 (July and August), nearly one million Hungarian Jews were rounded up and gassed to death at *Auschwitz-Birkenau*. In the area of Novardok the Russian and Jewish partisans had been attacking and undermining German power for many months. As 1944 pressed on the attacks became more regular as a weakened German army began to evacuate the area.

When the *Bielski* group was liberated towards the beginning of May 1944 they were in the *Naliboki* forest and numbered approximately 1230 Jews. The partisans were told by the Red Army that they could leave the forest and return back to town. On the 16th of July 1944 a large group of *Bielski* Jewish Partisans made their way back to Novardok. Among this group of survivors were Osher and his sister Fruma. As the group marched back to their *shtetl* which “not long ago was full of Yidden” they were happy in a sense to return but were sad as they “feared” they “were returning to a shtetl without Jews”. When they reached the shtetl “nothing was there”, the *Sude*, which once “used to have a bit of life”, was empty and it was felt “that no Jews remained there” in Novardok. Who could ever comprehend what those survivors felt and saw when they returned to their barren and now soul-less town. Survivors hoped that someone from their family survived, but it was a sheer miracle that anyone at all had survived in the face of the murderous Nazi killing machine.

¹⁶ The Allies of World War II were the countries officially opposed to the Axis powers during the Second World War, the British Empire, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the United States of America and China. Poland and France, before its defeat in 1940 and after Operation Torch, were considered major allies

The returning partisans from Novardok had no home to stay in so for their first night they all stayed in an empty farmer's house. The next day Osher and Fruma returned back to their street, and came into contact with their neighbour. The first thing the neighbour said to them was "are you still alive", asking in astonishment and also showing that it was clear that they were not wanted. They soon realised that the town had changed, in that there were now no Jews. Osher said that this confronting realisation "ate him up". He left his house in 1941 under orders to go to the *Sude* with a mother a father, three brothers and a sister and uncles, aunties and cousins. Now he returned thankful that he still had a sister. In a few short years his whole world was washed away.

While Fruma remained in Novardok, Osher was sent by the Soviets to *Vilna* to live in a Jewish orphanage where he stayed for four months, until the end of 1945. The orphanage housed about two hundred children and was run by Russians "who looked after it very well". Some children were chosen to be taken to Russian military schools. The Soviets attempted to enrol Osher but he resisted and ran away from *Vilna*, returning to his sister Fruma in Novardok.



Fruma and Osher in Novardok – 1946

When Osher returned to Novardok it was agreed with Fruma that "there was no use to stay" in Novardok, so they moved to Poland, where they stayed in a town called *Loish* and later to a British internment camp in *Admont*, Austria. Many survivors wished to go to Palestine which was under the British mandate, but it was very hard to be accepted there as you "needed to be privileged with certificates". Osher joined a *Betar* group in the camp and was imbued with Zionist ideals; however getting to Palestine seemed far fetched. Some survivors had relatives that lived in the United States and Argentina and had the possibility of relocating there. However at this time as the war was over Fruma and Osher were not so lucky and only had some relatives in France, which was also affected by the war. Osher decided to go to Paris to live with his Uncle Ichimeyer while Fruma remained in the camp in *Admont* Austria with her husband.

Osher had neither money nor a passport but met a “Jewish fellow” who offered to take him to Paris, thinking that he’d receive some sort of reward in return for returning him to his allegedly rich Uncle. Osher travelled to Paris by train, when he was almost sixteen years old. When Osher arrived in France his Uncle received him very well and Osher began to “feel life”. Osher’s Uncle could not provide anything for him, as he too was struggling after the devastation of the war, so Osher was sent to a Jewish orphanage in *Musack, France*. Osher stayed there for three years, in which he received an education and learnt to speak French. However Osher’s saw no future in war torn Europe. When he heard that Fruma was living in Australia he decided to join her. Osher had no money at the time, yet the Australian government received him because he had relatives in Australia. In June 1951 Osher arrived by ship in Sydney, just before his twenty-first birthday.



Osher in Admont, Austria - circa 1945

A new life in Australia

When Osher arrived in Australia at twenty one years old he felt as if he had “started his life” again. Osher had basic schooling yet “had it in himself” to succeed in life, because as he saw it “if someone wants something they can get it” and “a person can achieve whatever they want, depending on how much they want it” and Osher “wanted what he got”.

Osher started out performing in Jewish theatre and at one stage was a Jewish studies teacher and a Yiddish teacher, teaching children between the ages of twelve and thirteen his *mamaloshen*, his mother tongue, Yiddish. Osher progressed from working in the *Metres* stove factory to selling buttons door to door into the real estate business and managed boarding houses.



Osher giving a speech to the Yiddish Folk Centre in 1952, Sydney Australia

In 1958 Osher went to a Jewish Russian barber on Hall Street in Bondi to get his hair cut, where he met a man that came from Vilna and spoke Russian and Yiddish, Avram Certok. Osher was invited over for a Shabbat dinner that Friday night, where he was introduced to Avram's sixteen year old daughter, Adele. "Adele was very shy" and "looked simple" while Osher was "already prominent" with a car and "full of ambition". Osher asked Adele out for coffee and married her in 1959 in a "big wedding in central Synagogue" in Bondi Junction, just before she turned seventeen years old and once Osher was already twenty nine.

As Osher matured he kept his *Yiddishkite* as he believed very strongly in "his roots" and where he came from. Osher viewed himself as being a conservative Jew, like his father, that was "not really religious" but he did not work on Shabbos and attended synagogue on a regular basis, while keeping kosher and practicing all Jewish festivals. Osher continued to believe in religion very strongly and brought his three children up like this, sending them to Moriah College.

In 1960 Osher and Adele had their first child, Monica, who married Danny Morgenstern and is the mother of two children, Olivia who is now sixteen and Jonathan who is twenty one. Adele and Osher's second child Eric, my father, was born in 1962, and is now a solicitor and a father of four; Iliya who is sixteen, Daria who is fourteen, Kara who is ten and David who is six. The family was also blessed with the birth of David in 1969, "the flower of the family" and was tragically taken in 1993. Osher felt that this misfortune "took a lot away" and in a sense "touched him more than the executions did", yet he has grown to accept it, like he has with the tragic deaths of the Holocaust, that "god gives and god takes". Osher's sister Fruma passed away in 2004 and left behind two children, Josef, who has two young sons, Ari and Jared and Grace, mother of two grown up adults Adina and Adam.

Ultimately Osher stated that he lived a satisfied life in Sydney Australia, what he called a “simple life”, with his “shtetl mentality” and “Yiddishkite”; he managed to survive the tragic events of the Holocaust. Even though he lost almost all his family he believes that he has to “continue on”, and “prove that he, and all Jews are alive” and we have to continue and “remember the Holocaust as not being a story” but of what actually “happened”. Osher stated the “Jews were slaughtered like sheep”, but the Partisans fought back for our parents, our brothers, sisters, uncles, aunties, cousins. The strong feeling of *Nakoma* and the will to live was very strong. Osher’s experience in the partisans gave him an outlook on life that you had to be forceful, determined and if necessary aggressive. Osher always loved *Betar* and likewise has a very strong love of Israel and the belief that Israel must be strong and aggressive in determining its future. Osher often says he does not know how he survived; many much stronger and brighter than him were killed or slaughtered. He does not know if it was luck or *barshet* (G-ds destiny). His memories still trouble him sometimes with the question - *why*. Yet one thing was constant, he never gave up. His childish charm, undeniable courage and optimistic nature to keep going forward against all odds and always in small steps some how caused him to survive and ultimately to excel beyond his wildest imagination in Australia to create a whole new family.



Monica, Eric and David – Eric and Aliza's Wedding 1989, Hyde Park, Sydney, Australia



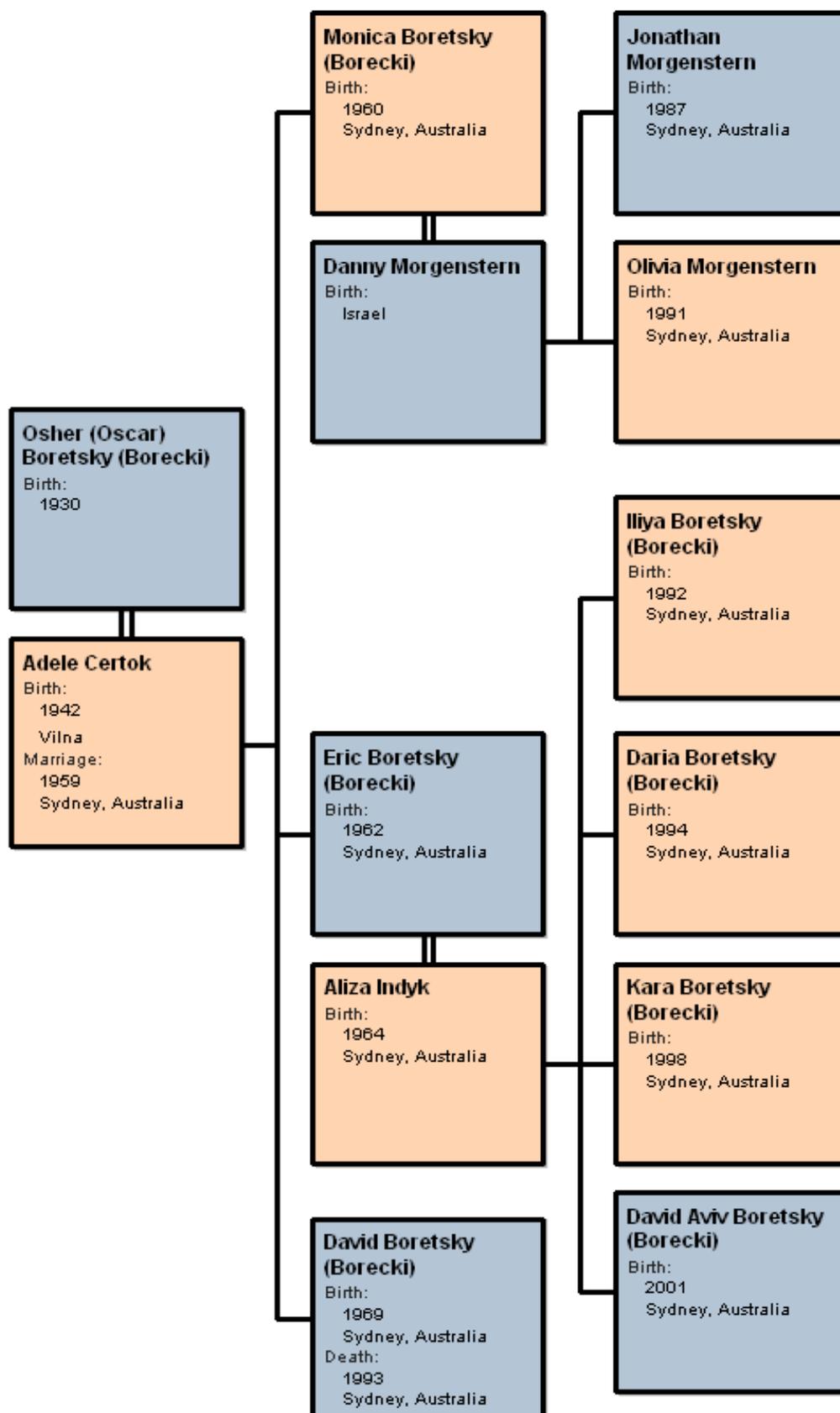
Adele and Osher Boretsky- 1989, Eric and Aliza's Wedding, Queen Victoria Building, Sydney, Australia



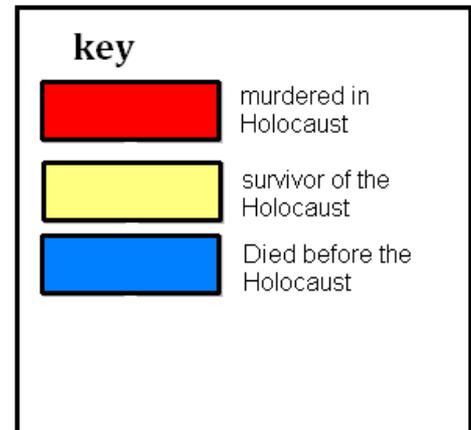
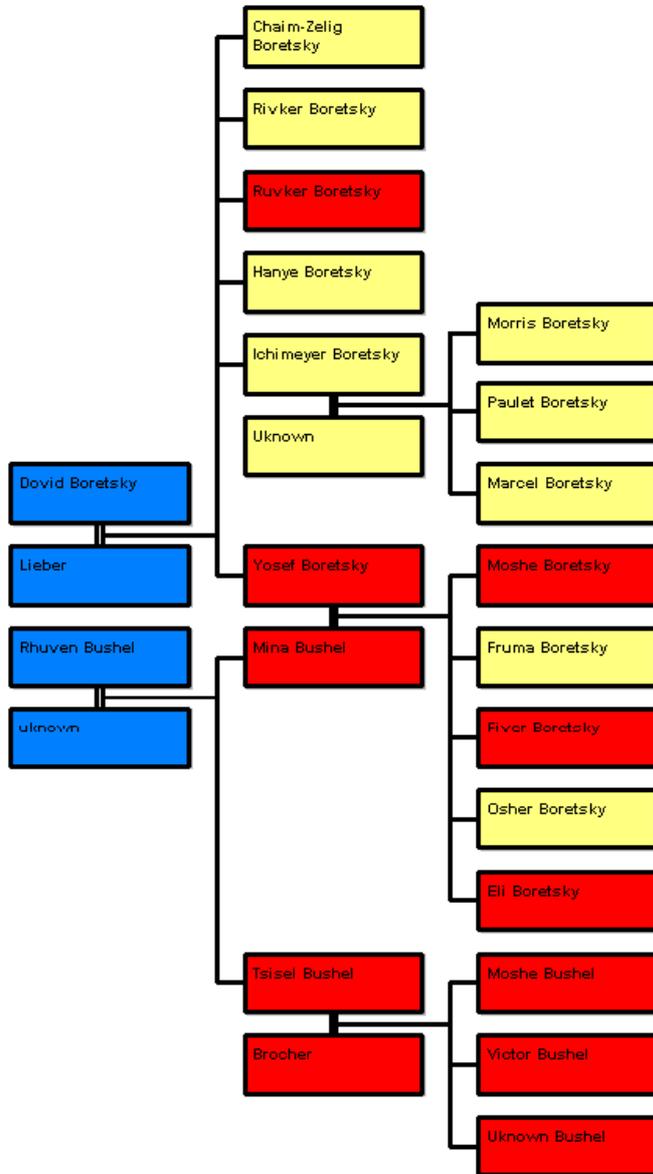
Daria, Adele, Osher, David, Eric, Iliya, Kara and Aliza Borecki – Centennial Park, Sydney, Australia 2001

Descendants of Osher (Oscar) Boretsky (Borecki)

September 2008



The Bushel and Boretsky family after the Holocaust



Continued from page 1

Kagan twice managed to flee the ghetto.

"The second time, two of my toes were amputated because of the cold," he said. His escape was enabled thanks to ghetto prisoners digging a tunnel dug that also allowed 230 others to reach the woods. "We heard about the Bielski brother hiding in the forest and we joined them."

The Bielskis were the sons of a family of farmers from a nearby village. Brothers Tuvia and Zus Bielski deserted their retreating units in the Red Army and joined their brother Asael who ran the family farm. They were tall, blond and sturdy. From the first instance, they refused to go to the ghetto or wear a yellow Star of David. They fled to the woods together with their families. In time, they were joined by hundreds of people.

During 1943, they formed a kind of shtetl in the heart of the woods; they dubbed it "Jerusalem of the woods." Villagers from nearby areas cooperated with them once they realized the Bielskis were more dangerous to them than the Nazis. When a local farmer turned in a group of Jews that came to ask for food, they retaliated by killing him and his family, and burning down his house.

In 1944, when the area was liberated by the Red Army, a group of 700 Jewish survivors emerged from the woods.

Asael Bielski was killed in the Red Army, but after the war the remaining Bielski brothers Tuvia and Zus made aliyah to Israel. They lived in the Tel Aviv suburb of Hodot and worked as drivers. Tuvia eventually immigrated to New York where he died in 1987.

"He was a very modest man," Miki Bielski, his son, said. "He told me: 'You'll see that after my death I'll be more famous than during my life.'" And so it was. After his death he was brought rest in a military burial on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day



A moment in memory of the Bielski. The boys in the foreground are looking at a book. Inset (from left to right): Tuvia, Zus and Asael Bielski.

New movie about Bielski brothers will star Daniel Craig

Jewish partisans get to tell their story

By Tami Alon

"Killing a man is like striking a granite," wrote Joseph Conrad in a man of few words, was accompanied by Sgt. Renzi, who pulled away the scene again. Conrad, who was of the 100th Central Postal Directory, a Jewish group of partisans hidden by the Bielski brothers who fought the Nazis from their base in the forests of Poland.

They did not hesitate to eliminate Jewish traitors and collaborators and were responsible for saving 200 Jews from being killed in the Holocaust. Their courageous story

was told for decades but later this year a movie based on their life and starring Daniel Craig, the current James Bond, will hit the screens. The screenplay is based on the book "The Bielski Family," written by Dr. Nechama Patai, a historian from the University of Connecticut and herself a Holocaust survivor.

The Bielski partisans were recognized last night, a day before the Holocaust Remembrance Day, at a concert by the Hofmann Symphony Orchestra. The event was organized by Holocaust survivors and their children. Gary Renzi, Inzi's son, arrived especially from New York.

"Dad was reticent and always refused to talk to me about what happened," he said. "But one time he opened up his heart to me and told me how proud he was of his family's courage. He was truly, undeniably, a hero." The movie, which is currently in production, will depict the life and death of the Bielski family.

Gary Renzi's visit here is not his first. He first arrived in the country 40 years ago to volunteer to serve in the Israel Defense Forces elite unit, Hahatza.

"I came here because I heard there were pretty girls, but mostly because I wanted to be a Jewish fighter like my dad was," he said.

After the concert, Renzi met Jack Kagan who told him his father was "one of the most daring in the group." Kagan, a plastic producer from Lod, is the only one who was not a survivor of the Bielski partisans.

"I was in the Bielski's ghetto, Kagan reported. "It was a city in the forest of which half its population of 12,000 people was Jewish. It's best known as the place where the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz was born." Shortly after Operation Dambora, the Nazis concentrated Jews in ghettos and later labor camps.

By PARTISAN, Page 4

Reprint in the European Jewish Congress Newsletter dated April 30, 2008

Jewish Partisans Remembered; Their Story To Hit The Big Screen

Haaretz

By Yossi Melman

"Killing a man is like smoking a cigarette," Itzke Reznik, known as a man of few words, was accustomed to say. Reznik, who passed away nine years ago in Canada, was one of the intrepid fighters in the so-called Bielski commandos, a Jewish group of partisan fighters headed by the Bielski brothers who fought the Nazis from their base in the forests of Belarus.

They did not hesitate to eliminate Jewish snitches and collaborators and were responsible for saving 1,200 Jews from being killed in the Holocaust. Their courageous story went untold for decades but later this year a movie based on their tale and starring Daniel Craig, the current James Bond, will hit the screens. The screenplay is based on a book, "Defiance : The Bielski Partisans," written by Dr. Nechama Tec, a sociologist from the University of Connecticut and herself a Holocaust survivor.

The Jewish partisans were remembered last night, a day before the Holocaust Remembrance Day, at a concert by the Ra'anana Symphony Orchestra. The event was organized by Holocaust survivors and their children. Gary Reznik, Itzke's son, arrived especially from New York.

Advertisement

"Dad was reticent and always refused to talk to me about what happened," he said. "But one time he opened up his heart to me and told me briefly about his and his friends' doings. He was most comfortable in presence of his brothers in arms. They would occasionally meet, drink and reminisce."

Gary Reznik's visit here is not his first. He first arrived in the country 40 years ago to volunteer to serve in the Israel Defense Forces elite unit, Haruv.

"I came here because I heard there were pretty girls, but mostly because I wanted to be a Jewish fighter like my dad was," he said.

After the concert, Reznik met Jack Kagan who told him his father was "one of the most daring in the group." Kagan, a plastics producer from London, is almost 80, and was only 14 when he joined the Bielski partisans.

"I was in the Navahrudak ghetto," Kagan recounted.

"It's a city in Belarus of which half its population of 12,000 people was Jewish. It's best known as the place where the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz was born." Shortly after Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis concentrated Jews in ghettos and later labor camps. Kagan twice managed to flee the ghetto.

"The second time, two of my toes were amputated because of the cold," he said. His escape was enabled thanks to ghetto prisoners digging a tunnel dug that also allowed 230 others to reach the woods. "We heard about the Bielski brother hiding in the forest and we joined them.

The Bielskis were the sons of a family of farmers from a nearby village. Brothers Tuvia and Zus Bielski deserted their retreating units in the Red Army and joined their brother Asael who ran the family farm. They were tall, blond and sturdy. From the first instance, they refused to go to the ghetto or wear a yellow Star of David. They fled to the woods together with their families. In time, they were joined by hundreds of people.

During 1943, they formed a kind of shtetl in the heart of the woods ; they dubbed it "Jerusalem of the woods." Villagers from nearby areas cooperated with them once they realized the Bielskis were more dangerous to them than the Nazis : When a local farmer turned in a group of Jews that came to ask for food, they retaliated by killing him and his family, and burning down his house.

In 1944, when the area was liberated by the Red Army, a group of 700 Jewish survivors emerged from the woods. Asael Bielski was killed in the Red Army, but after the war the remaining Bielski brothers Tuvia and Zus made aliyah to Israel. They lived in the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon and worked as drivers. Tuvia eventually immigrated to New York where he died in 1987.

"He was a very modest man," Miki Bielski, his son, said. "He told me : 'You'll see that after my death I'll be more famous than during my life.'" And so it was. After his death he was brought rest in a military burial on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

Bibliography

NOTE: Statements in quotation marks and comments made by Osher Boretsky have been derived from a video testimony of his experiences during the Holocaust made by the *Shoah Foundation Institute* in May 1994 .

Books

- *Yehudy Yaar* (Forest Jews), by Tuvia Bielski in Hebrew, Tel Aviv 1946.
- *Novogrudek Memorial Book*, in Yiddish and Hebrew, printed in Tel Aviv in 1963.
- *Partisans*, by Yehoshua Jaffa, printed in Hebrew
- *In Ghetto Novogrudek and in the partisan movement*, by Yehoshua Jaffa. Printed in Israel in 1988. (in Hebrew)
- *Defiance* (The Bielski partisans), by Nachama Tec 1993.
- *Surviving the Holocaust with Russian Jewish partisans*, by Jack Kagan and Dov Cohen 1998. In Byelorussian (Minsk 1999) In French (Paris 2002)
- *The Bielski Brothers*, Peter Duffy, Published 1993 by Harper Collins in the United States, the same book for the United Kingdom was called 'Brother in Arms'

Internet

- *Novogrudek – The History of a Jewish Shtetl*, www.novogrudek.co.uk – accessed on the 27th of August 2008
- Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, *The Bielski Brothers and the Otriad*, www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/bielski.html - accessed on the 27th of August 2008
- The Jewish Virtual Library, *The Holocaust*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/holo.html - accessed on the 27th of August 2008

School Booklets

- *Holocaust Studies: Book One*, Compiled by the Department of Jewish History Moriah College
- *Holocaust Studies: Book Two*, Compiled by the Department of Jewish History Moriah College

Newspaper Articles

- *Haaretz Newspaper, Jewish Partisans get to tell their story*, written by Yossi Melman – April the 30th 2008
- *Australian Jewish News, Life with the Bielski Brothers*, written by Jackie Erenbolm – 1st of February 1996

Images

- Sourced from Eric Borecki and the above books