

Embattled Commissioner

Russell George Oswald

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Once again yesterday, as he had done the day before, a short, heavy-set man bustled to and fro in the devastation of the Attica State Correctional Facility, inspecting, negotiating, conciliating.

He granted concessions to rebellious inmates. He listened—his greenish-brown eyes expressionless—while the prisoners read demands and manifestoes.

Man
in the
News

And when he could, he pressed for the release of the guards held as hostages.

Once yesterday, flanked by a self-appointed guard of club-wielding, football-helmeted prisoners, he listened as angry rebels suggested that he too be taken hostage.

The proposal was shouted down, and when Russell George Oswald, the New York State Commissioner of Correctional Services, emerged from the confrontation, he admitted to the doubt that had assailed him when his fate had become a subject of discussion.

"I didn't know," he said, "whether I was going to get out or not."

There was a certain irony in the fact that the freedom of Mr. Oswald, who was appointed the state's principal prison official last December, should have become an issue within the walls of a maximum-security prison.

Had Pledged a Change

Only last month, he had pledged himself to changing a situation in which such prisons dominate the facilities available for the state's 14,000 criminal inmates.

"We've inherited this situation," he said, "and it's tremendously costly in terms of dollars to move out of facilities that are already there. But one day we have to, by attrition, move out of those facilities into more community-oriented programs.

"And I have promised myself and in press conferences I've said that if I failed to move at least 30 per cent of these people out of maximum-security facilities within the next three years, I won't have done my job."

Would he then resign? The answer was unequivocal. "Yes."

An expert in criminal rehabilitation, Mr. Oswald came to his \$40,000-a-year post as head of a department

with a budget of some \$90-million and a staff of nearly 8,000 after 12 years with the State Board of Parole, most of the time as chairman.

Last Jan. 1, less than a month after Governor Rockefeller announced Mr. Oswald's appointment, the Department of Correction was merged with the Division of Parole to create the Department of Correctional Services.

Since taking office, Mr. Oswald has liberalized access by newsmen to prisons and prisoners and ended censorship of letters to prisoners from lawyers and public officials. Training of correction officers has been extended, plans for academic and vocational training of inmates have been announced, and greater community involvement in rehabilitation of prisoners has been encouraged.

"He is," a colleague said yesterday of Mr. Oswald, "a man who is extremely interested in human beings."

Native of Wisconsin

Born in Racine, Wis., on Aug. 4, 1909, Mr. Oswald is the son of the late George Oswald and the former Rose Cullen. After attending schools in Racine, where he met his future wife, Jane Hurlbut, Mr. Oswald entered the University of Wisconsin and later the Marquette University Law School, where he earned a juris doctor degree. Subsequently he earned a master's degree in psychiatric social work at Loyola University.

He began his career in social work for the Racine County Welfare Department, and served later as director and supervisor of county public assistance agencies in the Milwaukee area. He also served as police commissioner of Racine.

In 1948 he was appointed director of the Wisconsin Bureau of Probation and Parole and in 1950 director of the State Division of Corrections. In 1955 he became Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Correction, where he served until his appointment in June, 1957, to the New York State Board of Parole.

A man with thinning, silvery hair who enjoys cigars and shuns lunch in the battle against his waistline, Mr. Oswald makes his home in an English country-style house in a suburban setting in Schenectady.

The Oswalds have one child, a son, Kurt, 24 years old, who is attending the Graduate School of Public Affairs at the State University at Albany, where his father occasionally lectures.

In the Oswald home, Mrs. Oswald is represented by a collection of antiques, and Mr. Oswald by a collection of trophies that mark his prowess as a golfer.