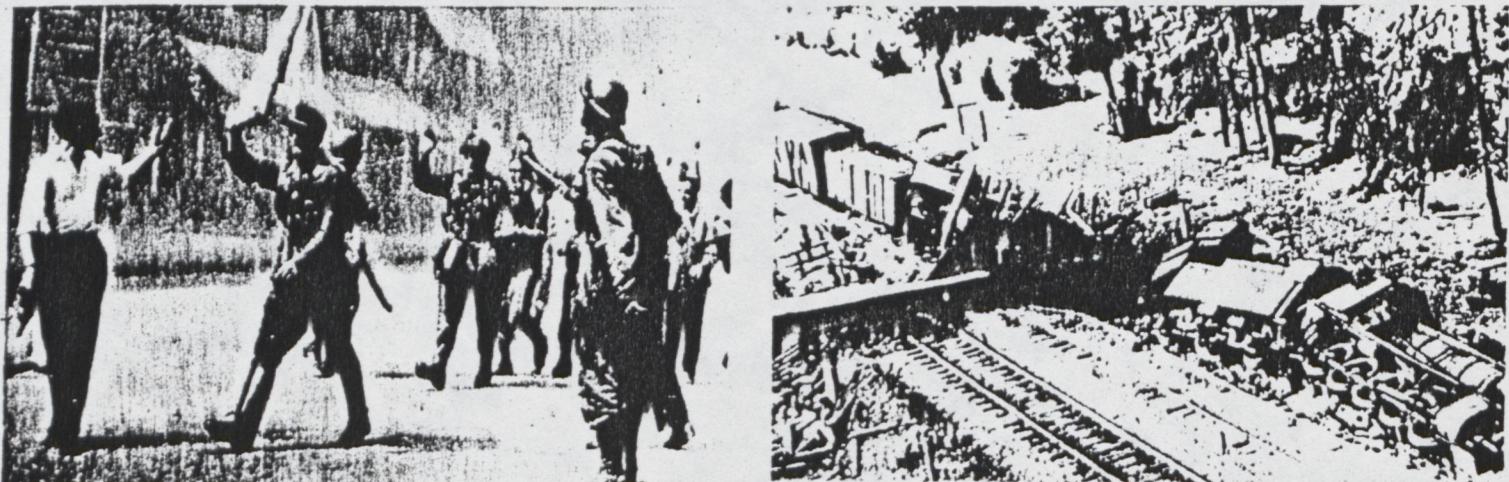


ANTHROLOGY ON ARMED JEWISH RESISTANCE 1939-1945

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Compiled and Edited
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Isaac Kowalski

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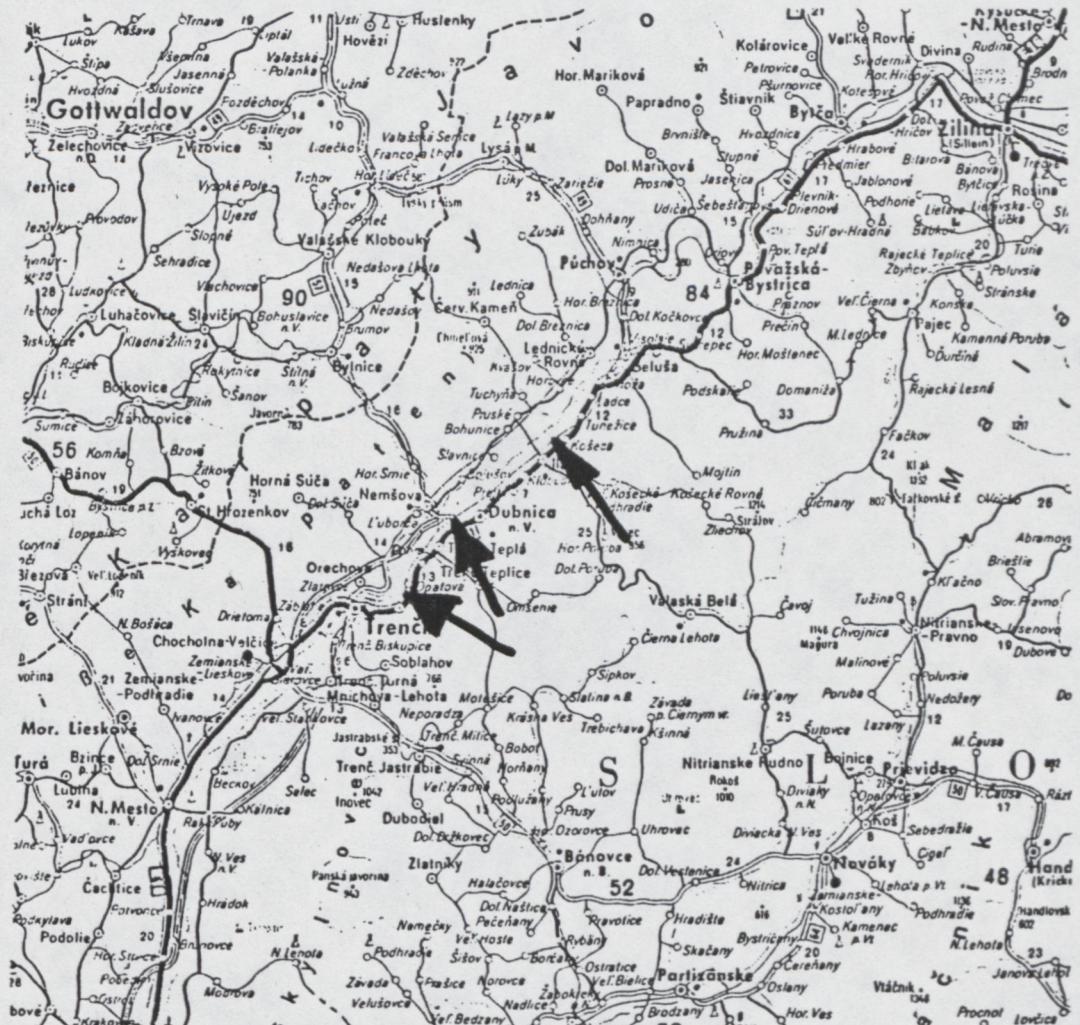
Brig. Commander in Byelorussia who saved
1200 Jews

Introduction written by
CAPT. SAMUEL (MIETEK) GRUBER

Partisan Commander in Poland and now
Pres. Federation of Underground Fighters
and Holocaust Survivors in U.S.A.

Boy Partisan Aids in Destruction of Freight Train

By Paul A. Strassmann



PAUL A. STRASSMANN, joined the partisans in Slovakia at the age of 15. He came to the USA in 1948. After studying engineering he devoted his career to computers. He has recently retired from one of the largest international corporations as Vice President. He is also widely known as an author, teacher and lecturer.

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The dreaded SIPO (SS-Security Police) arrived in Trenčín early in the morning of September 1, 1944. The town was full of rumors about rapidly escalating partisan attacks which precipitated the arrival of the specially trained police units. So far as I was concerned, my thinking was occupied with the urgency of leaving the shelter where my father's friend had been hiding me. My protector suddenly became afraid and hostile, expecting house to house searches any moment. "Why don't you go away and hide in the brush near the river Vah and come back late at night when it is safe," he said.

I had no choice. My father had been already betrayed and taken away. My mother and sister were hiding and I could not reach them. With a piece of bread and cheese, two apples, dressed only in shorts held by a rope, sandals and a dirty T-shirt to look like a local urchin, I ran to the river. A great deal of military activity could be observed across the bridge in Trenčín.

Early in the afternoon I heard persistent small arms fire in the mountains to the east of Trenčín. German artillery started firing into the woods. Since the shooting continued it dawned on me that I had finally located where the elusive partisans could be found. Without further thought about returning to my hiding place, I plunged into the river and let the current float me downstream, as far away from the Germans as possible. After a few miles I got out of the water and began walking in the direction from where one could hear occasional shots.

Actually finding and joining the partisans turned out to be more difficult than I expected. After two days of walking through the woods there was no sight of them. Intermittent explosions could now be heard only in the distance. The progress through the woods was slow because I kept off the roads. On the third day I ran into six deserters from the Slovak Army resting at a clearing in the woods. I almost got killed by running towards them. They ridiculed the idea of my joining the partisans. No troop would want to bring along an inexperienced Jewish boy, they said. They felt sorry for me and gave me food, a hand grenade and showed me how to load a rifle. Then they chased me away.

With the hand grenade my courage improved remarkably. Instead of sneaking through the woods, I decided to take a logging road. On the fifth day I saw in the distance a tall figure carrying what looked like a weapon. I jumped



Paul A. Strassmann

behind a tree, pulled the pin from the hand grenade and waited. It turned out to be a Jewish acquaintance from Trencin who also emerged from hiding and was now going to deliver a stolen light machine gun to the partisans. This man had previous military training, which was lucky, because I did not know how to safely replace the pin in the hand grenade. The luck persisted because that evening we discovered in the valley a parked truck being loaded with partisans who had just come back from a raid. And that is how I got introduced to the "Batko" demolition squad.

"Batko" was an tough, battle-tested Russian partisan who parachuted into Slovakia early in August 1943, to organize resistance groups and teach them methods of partisan fighting. He was just coming, along with nine men -- including three Jews -- from a raid which was aborted because his people were not familiar with the Trencin territory. Here my escape and the hand grenade story received a more favorable reception. "Batko" decided that I was just the right sort of a decoy to place ahead of the next raid. And so I was allowed to join the partisans. I was given a rifle, plenty of ammunition and as many hand grenades as I could carry. Suddenly there was plenty of food, clothing and medical help. The next attack on the two-track Trencin-Zilina railroad line was also ordered immediately after the squad returned to the brigade headquarters. Clearly, this was the way how to deal with the Germans!

The objective was to find a curve on the railroad where the wheels of the engine would be pressing hard on the inside of the track. The trick is to find just the right moment when the front of the train is passing and then just blow up one rail. If that is done right, the engine would derail and pull the rest of the trains right off the railroad embankment. My entire military training took perhaps not more than a half an hour. A wooden plank was used to explain how to blow up a rail track. I was to follow "Batko" with the TNT to the top of the railtrack and pass on to him the detonators. Others would spread out to provide covering fire in case of pursuit or if we were discovered prematurely.

And so began my first mission against the Germans, setting a pattern to be repeated many times. The squad was driven by the truck as close to the destination as was possible, which was about 20 km. from Opatova (see

the enclosed map). Now the hard phase began. We had to avoid detection since the villages were full of informers. The first night the moon was shining so we would walk all night and sleep during the day. The second night it started raining lightly and it was very dark. At dawn of the following day we finally arrived at the edge of the hill overlooking the rails. There was not much traffic but when trains came along they were loaded, long and slow. "Batko" was pleased because the conditions were ideal for our purposes. Approaching trains could be heard coming from a distance thus giving us about 12 minutes warning to mine the correct rail.

In the evening the rain was pouring down. I was sent down the hill to find an approach path. The flat ground separating the edge of the forest from the railroad was freshly plowed and muddy (see picture of the location taken in the Summer of 1945). There were only two paths between adjoining fields. We moved into position in a ditch under the rail embankment. One could hear a train from the distance. The rain muffled the sound and so we had less than five minutes to set up. I climbed to the rails and sat there watching the headlights of the locomotive approach. "Batko" placed two boxes of TNT under the rails and set them up so that at least one would go off. He attached two detonation cords and asked for his detonation caps to be attached to the cords and taped to the top of the rail. I carried the detonators in a thick leather pouch, lined with soft cotton padding. In the excitement of passing the caps I did not close the pouch and all of its contents-- about a dozen caps -- spilled when I jumped up to get ready to run. This was a disaster because the squad had no way of replacing the detonators, even though we had plenty of TNT. "Batko's" work done, he got off the embankment and ran towards the woods. By this time the lights of the engine illuminated enough of the roadbed so that I could see the shiny copper detonation cartridges and pick them up. I shoved them into my pocket, picked up my rifle and started running. In the unthinking panic I made the second mistake. I ran into the open muddy field instead of following the path. Imagine running for your life on a sticky paste. After about 50 meters I knew that it was time to hit the ground because the engine was just about passing the spot with the two mines. As I fell the TNT blew up. Pieces of metal whizzed by me and I heard them digging up the mud all

around me, and then I saw the entire front of the train slowly rolling off the embankment, just as "Batko" predicted. I could hear the shouts of the soldiers riding the train and feel the crunching of metal as rear railcars jammed against the wreck that piled up across the rails.

I was not hit by the flying scrap but I got singed by the hot water from the steam boiler. I started running when I heard a shot, followed by a whooshing sound. Arching over me was a white spot which exploded into a slowly descending bright flame. The Germans on the armed tail of the train were putting up illuminating flares. I hit the mud again. Tracer bullets from a machine gun passed overhead raking the edge of the forest. When the first flare burned out, I started running again. There were always a few moments between flares to allow a small advance through the mud. Why nobody saw me remains a mystery, except that I was probably indistinguishable from a lump of mud. The tracer bullets continued to be fired aimlessly all over the terrain.

The entire squad finally re-assembled. Nobody was injured and everyone felt heroic about the destruction of the entire front of the train*. After a dash beyond the hill where the random firing could not reach us, "Batko" stopped and checked everybody's weapons, since we expected to be intercepted at the next road crossing. He pulled out his revolver and said that he would now get rid of the Jewish boy who lost his detonators. Subsequently I was told that he was joking, but I am still not sure about that after witnessing later on incidents how our leaders enforced partisan discipline. I put my hand into my pocket and pulled out a fistful of detonators. With terror the entire squad backed away. I completely forgot that even slight squeezing of the caps will blow them up. By some miracle I did not explode.

That's how I became an expert in the de-railing of trains and accepted by the partisans to apply my skills again near Trencin and then elsewhere. But nothing in my entire partisan experience that ended in March 1945 ever approached the luck and the results of what I still call "my first freight train at Opatova."

THAT'S HOW I BECAME AN EXPERT IN THE DE-RAILING OF TRAINS AND ACCEPTED BY THE PARTISANS TO APPLY MY SKILLS AGAIN NEAR TRENCIN AND THEN ELSEWHERE.

*This event is also noted on p. 332 of the comprehensive "History of Partisans in Czechoslovakia, 1941-45" published in Slovak by the PRAVDA Publishing Organization in Bratislava, 1984.