United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Paul Strassmann
July 7, 1990
RG-50.030*0227

PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Paul Strassmann, conducted on July 7, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

PAUL STRASSMAN
July 11, 1990

Q:Would you please tell me your full name?

A:I'm Paul A. Strassman.

Q:Where were you born and when were you born?

A:I was born, uh, January 24th, 1929 in Tren_ín [**Ger:** Trentschin] in Slovakia, which at that part...time was part of Czechoslovakia.

Q:You can look at me.

A:OK. Fine. OK.

Q:Uh, Paul, would you tell me about your parents and your family, your family life as a young child?

A:Uh my father uh was a very successful commander of the local battalion in the First World War. He was one of the very early educated, university educated, uh, young people so he immediately in the First World War got a commission in the Austro-Hungarian Army. In those days the army consisted of local battalions, people from the same town, from the same province went together; and, uh, that goes back to the feudal ways, how armies were organized. Uh, my father, uh, brought many of the people from the local district back home alive and, uh, after the First World War, he took his non-commissioned officers and, uh, set up a business where the non-commissioned officers from his

battalion became his distributors and my father was the wholesaler, and by 1930 my father dominated the, uh, the oil, fertilizer and, uh, uh, flour distribution business in the, in the entire province. In the, uh, mid-thirties, my father became a member of the, uh, provincial government, which was a part of...it was a sort of supervisory government on top of the bureaucracy and, uh, he became very closely associated with two priests, who, uh, subsequently figure very importantly in the events that happened sub...in the in the forties, and, uh, so my childhood was really, uh... as the only son...I had an older sister...of a very well-known public figure, and, uh, from my childhood I was aware of my father's position and his military background, which again will figure very importantly in, in the events to come. My mother and, uh, my father worked together in the business. They were very close partners. The business was downstairs and we lived upstairs and, uh, I went to a Jewish school. It was a Jewish elementary school, and had the usual normal childhood until, uh, 1936 when I decided to join HaShomer HaTzair, which was a youth organization which, uh, had very strong, uh, views of its, of its role in Israel, especially with regard to the notion of HaShomer being the guardian. Again, this is an important heritage because HaShomer HaTzair, uh, provided the backbone of all the Jewish guerrillas in, uh, Slovakia. It it was sort of assumed that, uh, HaShomer HaTzair will fight.

Q:How did you as a young man feel about it and, uh, why did you become involved in it?

A:Involved with what?

Q:HaShomer HaTzair.

A:Oh, it's just uh...I don't know...you go with a certain crowd, uh, in a small town. The...Tren_ín is a small town. It's it's a provincial head...uh, center of fourteen thousand people. The

Jewish population in that town was about fourteen hundred. Uh, there were not that many organizations and HaShomer HaTzair was very well organized and it was the organization and the people and, uh, the young people I gravitated to. The other group was a religious group and, uh, although my mother was very religious and was kosher and my grandfather always took me to schul, and I was a particularly good scholar, uh, my father and I were always sort of fairly, uh, liberal in our views from from the very childhood and therefore it was in...in...incomprehensible for me to join the the the religious part of the town. In fact the Jews in Tren_ín were really divided into three sort of groups. There were the the sort of conservative. Of course, this doesn't apply to the American definition of conservative. Uh there was reform conservative and then there was really the extremely religious Jews; and uh being uh very much involved in a community and uh with a father as a public figure and uh and particularly leader of HaShomer HaTzair in Tren_ín uh who had quite a bit of training in Palmach, uh we we sort of were set up for this this kind of an experience.

Q:Tell me what happened to you as uh as things began to change in your town?

A:Uh we had a...a very difficult decision. We were going to leave in uh 1938. My father decided uh to leave and we were all set up to leave. We had passports and so forth.

Q:What?

A:Uh my father was a fairly astute individual and he felt that the situation was untenable and becoming more so. Uh he uh uh interpreted the the the the experiences in Germany and Austria uh much more correctly than others did and he just did not feel that he wanted to to risk his family uh to the uh to the sort of experience that was happening in Germany and uh so we were going to leave uh the uh...we were sort of stashing money away. My

my mother, who was always the treasurer of the uh of the, of the family...as we got money and change it into foreign currency ... you know, uh mother took it and put it into a a metal box which she uh hid upstairs in the attic. The week when we were supposed to leave in 1938, she went up to withdraw the money. The box had fallen behind a radiator. It was a steam radiator; nevertheless the metal box focused the heat out of the steam radiator and all the money that was in there, which was our escape money, was charred and my father never said a bad word about it. In addition to that, there were uncles and grandparents and the whole family...my father was sort of the kapo of the family, I mean in the in the uh in the grand...godfather kind of a style...I mean there was a whole series of retinues, and uh uh my father, although he could have left totally poor and destitute uh between having no money at all and uh and uh the fact that there were just too many people who we couldn't take with us, my father decided to stay. So that what happened in '38. In '39 uh we uh started uh looking at the way how to change our relationships and at that time my father anticipated that the business would be taken away so he started uh really working with one of his confidants to divest himself of the business and in that respect my father was very forward looking. Of course when when the extreme measures came and particularly the legislation which started in, late in 1940 uh which was a very elaborate process for uh expropriating the Jews before destroying them, uh my father was sufficiently skilled to uh to uh divest himself of things before people divested him of it. In addition to that his relationships with the uh two priests who were prominent including the Catholic priest, a man by the name of Branecky, who just by coincidence was in the same seminary as Dr. Joseph Tiso, who became the quisling president of Slovakia, uh Branecky assured him that whatever will happen to Jews, uh Branecky personally protect my father because of the services my father has rendered to the community, so uh we in many respects always anticipated the losses that were coming and uh we divested of property. We moved out of our house. Uh, we moved uh started moving into less and less uh proper quarters. We ultimately ended in a shack, sort of in the slums of Tren_ín

but but uh at least the, the family stayed together and uh although the cousins and the nieces and the uh in-laws were all deported in '42. My father couldn't protect them anymore. Uh, my father, uh, with the protection of Branecky got a presidential writ which protected my father uh from deportation. My father continued working in the store which was economically very important for for Slovakia because still of the distribution of oil and fertilizer and flour, so my father continued actually managing the enterprise.

Q:Can you pause a little bit?

A:Yes.

Q:Uh Paul, tell us what it was like in Tren_ín from 1940, 1941. You have described what was happening to your family, but I'd like to know a little bit more about what was happening in the town, what life was like for you as a young man during that period.

A:Well, my life was revolving around uh the school and HaShomer HaTzair and uh as 1940 came to pass, uh there were restrictions where you could go for instance. There were certain places where we could not go hiking anymore. Uh, you couldn't go to movies. By 1940 the radios were taken away. Um... by 1941 you couldn't have a telephone. Uh by uh early 1941 the Jewish school had to collapse itself, all of its grades, into a small classroom. I mean there was continual, almost monthly, new regulation and proscriptions and prescriptions of what you could or couldn't do. Uh by 1941 you had to wear a yellow star, and that meant that when you walked down the street uh when the local ruffians wanted to beat you up, uh they just beat you up. Of course that led to the fact that we always went together as crowd. I mean there were no rough tactics like using knives or anything like that...it was just uh sticks and fists. So, you know, 1940, 1941 uh was conversion of HaShomer HaTzair into sort of a youth gang. Uh from a childhood

standpoint actually, uh it was a wonderful experience. It sort of made things very intense and very important, and suddenly things became just very very ... things which you would not have believed were important became very important. For instance uh most of the Jews had to get rid of their books. You were not allowed to have books. I mean there's lots of things...you couldn't have this, this and that, so the notion that you could read a book, or that somebody owned a book, was a matter of great importance because if you could borrow a book uh and you had a book or you had access to somebody who borrowed your book, that was subject of very very much conversation--who reads what. It became a very intense kind of a life...uh life became very precious. Uh so so I'm not looking at that period in fact uh with with dismay. It became a very very intensive life where every moment mattered and everything mattered, and you became very cautious and very very forward looking, very calculating, and very well organized, so.... Of course by the end of 1940 or early in 1941, the Jewish school was dissolved. Uh, it just happened that my father arranged for some people, and and there were some refugees, to to start tutoring me at home; so starting in 1941, I had private tutors including some very distinguished uh people who otherwise would have, I would never have met in terms of education. Uh I started studying English in 1941. I had an excellent uh English teacher from Vienna. I didn't have a piano. We were not allowed to have a piano, but uh the local music teacher who was the wife of a local judge let me practice on her piano. It it's that sort of experiences ... they are they are sort of savoring life and savoring experiences. Uh, you know, sure I got beaten up, but we also beat up some of them too, I mean, so uh we learned how to do dirty fighting and kicking. Uh we did not always run. Most of the time we did. Uh and the relationship between the the the young people, I mean the people with whom I was in those days uh...I mean and and one of them is in Sweden, one of them is in Israel, one of them is in Prague, and they're all over the world. I can pick up the phone and talk to them like I can talk to nobody. Uh, a few months ago one of these boys who was with me uh wrote me a letter and in the letter he just mentioned that he has

tremendous headaches and uh that uh the doctors in Slovakia can't find out what's wrong with him, so I get the letter uh in the morning, I call up uh the other boy who was part of the group in Göteborg, Sweden, and I said, uh, Šano has headaches. If I send him by airplane tomorrow morning to Göteborg can you take care...can you take him to a doctor. He said of course. You know, it's like, you know, you know, like like continuing the same conversation of fifty years ago. I pick up the phone. I call Šano in Europe, I said there is a ticket waiting for you. Uh you just walk down the street and the travel agency and hop on the plane and Francl will pick you up at the airport. Now he hasn't seen Francl in fifty years, but, you know, it was just...it's that kind of a relationship. I, I don't have with nobody...I, I wouldn't pick up a phone like that with anybody else except my nearest family or my children, so you know, coming back to the forties and you want to get the spirit...it's, it's life of great intensity. It's life of great, uh, changing of outlook. Things become very precious, very important.

Q:And uh the noose then begins to tighten. What happens....

A:And as the noose becomes tightened, of course, then uh, you know, when the deportations start and this this is very ugly, uh but it's very bureaucratized. You know, the lists are made up, and, and, and in fact the the Jewish council administers the list, so the the Gestapo has just a few people. Then they have the Hlinka Guards, the quislings, and then you have the local gendarmes, and the whole thing is organized as a machine, and the machine uh because of its bureaucratic approach, becomes predictable which means that if you're skillful and if you have pull, uh you can anticipate the motions and then you can almost figure out the odds of survival and so life becomes on the part of my father very much preoccupied with understanding which way the laws are going and what do you give up in order to protect, so in 1942 when the uh deportations begin, my father is uh advised that, "Yes, we can protect you but if you would get baptized uh it would look

better because it would allow us to reclassify you from column 4BC to column 4DA which is a different priority." See, by that time uh the whole question of destruction becomes an arithmetic calculation. Who owes what favor to whom, what can you do to protect. And by the way, that is the sort of mentality that continues afterwards under the communist regime. It it is not just a Holocaust experience. It is a totalitarian experience. It's a Kafka's, Kafka-like experience, except it's accentuated because now the game becomes deadly, so my father said fine. OK. You know, you want to reclassify. Fine. We get baptized. I just got bar mitzvah in January '42, so then Father comes back and said you know, and we have to get baptized. Fine Dad. You know, how do we do that? Well, you know, uh we have to sort of get the thing organized and you have to qualify. We cannot get you into the Catholic Church because it takes too long and it requires Archbishop dispensation and it would take a couple of years, but uh you can get baptized in the Evangelic Church, which was a Protestant church. Uh and the Protestants are more flexible because of the heritage and we can do the whole thing in eight months and you have to go to school and learn the catechism and so forth, so part of the experience is one of how to survive in a totalitarian environment, how to adapt, how to change your skins, your habits, your behavior, because that is what the rules require.

Q:How did you go about it? How did this process of becoming ____ educated to become baptized, how did it...

A:Oh there is a procedure for that.

Q:I know. But how did...yes, I understand that. What I want to know is what did Paul Strassman do?

A:Oh, I, I, I'm, I'm a I'm a very skillful, highly disciplined young man who can concentrate, and if you have to learn the catechism and you have to learn the New Testament, uh, you know, it's it's a drill like learning anything else, so you know, if you have to learn things in order to get...you have to learn the tfillin to get bar bar mitzvah and read the Tanach to be bar mitzvah, well fine. They want me to do something else, I can do that too. It's, it's, uh, it's an adaptability, so if they want, you know...now they want me to jump through this loop, I'll go through this loop. If they want me to jump through this hoop, it that, it the price of survival and you know the calculation of this thing...you know classifica...reclassification from 4AB to 4DE means that you have another year to go. OK. And if that's what it takes, that's what you do. So it is the mental process that I'm trying to convey to you is that the genocide is a bureaucratic process with stipulated rules which all have escape clauses and that is not just genocide although it's, again let me emphasize, genocide is deadly. But it is a process which is almost banal in its bureaucratic predictability and manipulability and those who survive are the individuals who either have the power or the money and the know-how, but you have to have all three in order to be able to deal with that system. Now uh there are places where there is no escape clauses. When you're dealing with the Gestapo there is no escape clauses. Although even there there are escape clauses of sorts. Uh of course they are at a completely different level, but under the Slovak Republic which basically was a corrupt republic, um and uh a republic that always wanted to have an alibi for certain people...you know, there was...you always built an alibi for the next thing and if somebody's powerful and is protected by Branecky, well he must be important. If you want to preserve your options in the Slovak Republic you can navigate through that uh that uh environment and and if you know how to do it, you can survive a little longer than somebody else who does not know. The Jews who are deported in '42 are the powerless, the uh...they are the true victims. They are the ones who are not going to fit into the society very well.

Q:Did you see those deportations?

A:Oh yes. You know, the the lists were drawn up....

Q:I'd like you to describe one deportation that you saw for us.

A:Well, you you, there is a list that is drawn up and you know the night before from the friendly local gendarmes who is on the list. OK? Uh some people don't know that. Some people who are on the list don't find out, but if you are connected, you find out. There's always the last moments scurrying around, you know...can I get off the list? In '42 there's still the presumption, well we are just going from a very bad situation to just a worse situation. We are going to a work camp. The whole question of gas chambers and so forth is is absolutely not known in '42. Uh all the subsequent evidence shows that that uh that that some of the evidence is coming in at late '42, early '43 and that is being hidden, but in '42 the idea of deportation is just we're going to the next level of negotiation. OK. Now we're going to be entren...no, we already gave up, we already went through twelve circles of hell. OK. And so well, there's just another circle of hell. OK, well what else can they do? OK. Uh of course the the war doesn't look very good in '42, so uh the whole notion of going into any sort of resistance is totally utopian except under very extreme conditions. Uh there is already the first group of Jews who go into the uh mountains with arms in '42.

Q:Are you...were you and your father aware of that?

A:I wasn't, but my father was. And my father, considering the military situation and the fact that the front was, you know, a thousand, two hundred kilometers away and there was nothing

on the west, my father's military assessment was, you know, this is an option that uh that is a, you know, this is the twelve... twentieth level of hell. OK. But the survivability of a family uh, you know...and at that time I'm thirteen years old and I have a sister...survivability in the mountain. I mean, you have to get to other levels of degradation before you take that option, although starting in '42 my father starts doing something very interesting. Uh my father...and it has something to do with the squalid circumstances under which we live, although my mother made it, you know...it was quite presentable. I mean I I didn't suffer. We ate, you know, and the family life was very close. Uh, certain things were in short supply, so what? But uh my father starts taking us out...there were certain areas which, where we were permitted to go for hikes, certain areas. These were sometimes arbitrary restrictions. In other words, many of the laws as they came in...there was this bureaucratic factory churning out new restrictive laws. They would...say..."What else can we do to these people?" You know, "What next tightening of the screw can we do to make them miserable?" But there was a whole region, a whole area where, which was really away from the provincial town which was open, and so starting in '42, certainly in '43, my father takes us out for hikes, very long two-day hikes, and we spent lots of time in the mountains. My father always liked the outdoors, but it also means we get away from the oppressive environment. When you get get out to the uh small peasant villages out there the the, you know, it's different. The, the antisemitism is urban. It's connected with Jewish concentration where they have Jewish merchants and so forth. In the villages you don't have that. In addition to that, in these various villages were all of my father's little friends, so we could always stop in an inn which was owned by a guy who most likely owed his life to my father, and certainly owed his livelihood to my father, and this was...my father was the kapo and these these were the soldiers out there, so we go out to these villages and um clearly my father had this, you know, going out in the woods and surviving option on his mind because it was quite clear that if the Germans lose the war, and it was questionable in '42, uh, the front

will come over and then the question is what do you do in the transition. You clearly have to get out of the urban environment where the fighting will take place. So we get baptized in '42. I get bar mitzvah January 24, 1942, I get baptized in October. I'm very good at that by the way. I mean I mean the, the, the, uh, I mean this was very professionally done. I mean this was a proper baptism and the catechism and the whole thing and I'm very good at that. It turns that theologically the Lutheran religion appeals to me more than the Jewish religion because the Jewish religion is so obscure and so full of, you know, archaic rituals and the Lutheran Church in, uh, in, uh, in Slovakia in in 1940's was very modern, forward looking, highly educated church and that particular church was a very small minority so when the Lutherans are a minority they are very nice people. Because, you know, they live in this Catholic sea and uh, you know, then you suddenly can go to church, any church. They play Bach, and suddenly you can go to church on Sunday and it's perfectly legitimate. You're expected to. You know, you're baptized and the people are very nice. Lutherans say, well, you know, it's it jolly, you know, you know. You know, we got some Jews you know. Jesus Christ was a Jew and the Old Testament we read once in a while, you know. The more the merrier, and besides Mr. Zeman who was the other priest who uh, uh, liked my father very well and they were quite close...they were really friends, you know, always saw to it that on the way out of the church he stopped and talked to my father and talked to me and so forth. And old Zeman really liked me because, you know, I knew the catechism as as good as any, you know...he used...once, once Zeman said a terrible thing which my father sort of laughed about. Uh Zeman was teaching some kind of a theological discussion to a class, a Sunday class, and this kid just didn't know the answers, so Zeman say, "Well why don't you go and talk to Strassman. He'll explain it to you," and so the kid say, "Well, that's easy. He's a Jew. He knows it." (Laughter) You know, it was a reference to the Old Testament. My fath...father delighted in stories like that. So by end of '42, out of fourteen hundred Jews, uh we are down to about a hundred and fifty Jews in Tren_ín, and

the deportations come in. They are scheduled. There is this scurrying. Uh in the morning the local gendarme knocks at your door. The train is on a siding already scheduled. The whole thing is scheduled. The train is, it's usually uh a freight train but sometimes it's a passenger train, and uh and the gendarme comes and he gives you a piece of paper you have to sign. Uh early they uh in the first set of deportations uh they actually come for the young people first because they go through the pretense that this is a labor camp, so let's take the young people. So the parents have to sign a receipt for their son and then they have to sign that they receive a receipt. Procedure calls for that. And so the thing is just denuded, and of course everybody is trying to scurry. Everybody's trying to look for exemption but but...and everybody knows that there is a certain number of Jews who are not going to get to report although nobody knows how many. This is always kept open. And then there is a list and there are grades of protection. There is so-called a presidential exemption, and there is economic essential uh exemption. Then there is an exemption for people who were government employees. In in other words there's grades of exemption. Uh everybody spends a great deal of time trying to figure out what level of exemption they have. The train takes them...and people just go fairly uh fairly ... you know, you go and take a train. Uh there are rules. You can take only twenty kilos per person. Uh there's a big discussion ...well, what do you take? You know, do you take pots and pans, or don't you take pots and pans. Uh there is big discussion to the Judensrat, you know...uh give us a list of what to take. Do we take pots and pans? OK. And and those kind of questions. And the whole thing becomes involved in the minutia. The tragedies are not visible. There is not weeping or tearing. There is very little force. It is...you see you have now you have been through two years of being degraded more and more, so this is just another level of degradation, and by the way, you are going to _ilina, which is a transhipment camp. OK. A staging camp. And there are people who are able to get exemptions out of _ilina. In other words, you are shipped to _ilina but that's not the final because you could still then protest and if you

meet certain requirements you get an exemption to be pulled out of _ilina, so so the energies are invested in trying to escape, and that fits very well with the mentality of survival which is centuries and centuries old and that the Jews survive by bending, accommodating and negotiating.

Q:How did your father survive?

A:My father just, uh, uh...first, he had money and he...all of that was gone by '42. He had friends. He had influence, and he was very important. He was a very skillful man, and uh and he ran the biggest food business and oil business and petroleum business and fertilizer business, and all the stores were dependent, on him and there was enough people who said, you know, this guy is...and then he got the presidential exemption through Branecky, which was the highest level, so the word...well, you know, if any...you know, the last guy out out of Tren_ín will be Strassman. The question was could he protect family. You see, very often the exemption stopped at the family head, and the children had to go. And that's why we baptized because the this was there was this quirk is that if we baptize and he has number one exemption, then the thing falls in a different classification, so we baptized because of the children. It was a terrible thing for my mother. She never got over that.

Q:Your parents were not baptized?

A:Oh yes. Oh yes. Both of them. They had to be baptized. That that was part of the procedure, you know. You go and you look at the procedure and you study the procedure and you weigh the pros and cons. It, it creates a mentality which only a communist citizen or somebody who like Kafka would understand. It is a a twisted way of looking at the world. And the Jewish mentality, of course, after centuries of experience, was especially

well attuned to that because you negotiated your way out of Spain. You know, you became a Marrano. You baptized and all...I mean there's these innum...innumerable kind of deals that you can make, or you can reclassify yourself. Now you're not a Spaniard, you're a Portuguese. You're still in the same town, You give up the main house and so forth.

Q:Did the Strassman family live secretly as a Jew, as Jews while they were...after they had been baptized?

A:Turned out that my mother lived as a Jew, although there was no was no schul. There was nothing. There was no minyan. I mean the synagogue was closed. My wife...my mother was a Jew. I mean that she always was, but I enjoyed the the church. I mean I could go and hear Bach for the first time. They let me play on the organ and and and, uh, the people were very nice, and the Lutherans also were part of Sokol [**NB:** translation, "Falcon"]. I don't know whether you know what it...it was a Turnverein. It's a gymnastic club, OK? And, uh, you know, you couldn't do other things so and I mean I couldn't go to the movie. I couldn't listen to this. I couldn't listen to that, but apparently there was a loophole and nobody figured that a Jew would become a member of a Lutheran gymnastic club.

Q:What was that like for you?

A:Fine. You know, I, I, I, you know, I, I accommodated. Didn't wear a star after the presidential exemption. Somebody who had a presidential exemption, he and his family did not have to wear a star. OK. And um, you know, everybody knew that I was a Jew. Uh, as a matter of fact, after the major deportation uh I think the bullies laid off me. I mean they just...the bullies didn't go after me any more. I mean most of my HaShomer HaTzair

group was gone, uh with the exception of two and uh there was just not many things to pick on. Now I got beaten up maybe once or twice a year, but that's all. I mean it was not just continual harassment. It was the, the, the yellow star that gave free license to the bullies to beat up everybody. Once you didn't have a yellow star...well, it confused them. I mean it's, it's a, it's a very funny totalitarian society, is a very funny kind of society. You know, in many respects it lives by some very rigid rules.

Q:What happened...tell us what happened next. I'm sorry.

A:Well, this is '42. The deportations take place and now there is hundred and fifty Jews left in Tren_ín. The Jews are living very low key, don't go out on the square. You know, you want to be as un...invisible as possible. My father gets up early in the morning and he goes to the store. He's not in the front office. I mean it's his own store, but he's in the back office, you know, doing the paper work and the ordering and and the scheduling of things and who gets what, because you know, there's rationing and it becomes very complicated. Uh, uh, I go to the appointed tutors. I go to the gym. Uh, I go to the church on Sunday, which is enjoyable. My sister finds a job as a clerk. My mother is at home. The grandparents, one set of grandparents is protected...my father's...my grandfather from the father's side is protected because of my father's exemption. Those are the only part of the family that can be protect...they don't go out at all. They just stay in this one room hovel, and I bring them food. They don't go out shopping. I mean they they are just invisible. And so starting in '42 except for the long hikes we take on weekends, we are invisible. It's a total shrinking in, and trying to listen to Radio London, uh, trying to find out what the news is, uh, having a map which you open every night and you see what happens on the Russian front and reading the newspapers to try to guess what really happened. Uh, it's, it's a very...you know, you live in a two room apartment which includes a kitchen and uh that goes on. Uh, '43...I mean there is annoyances and

uh but after the major bulk deportations, the Slovaks have done, you know, what the the uh Nazis wanted and the Slovaks have gotten all the properties they wanted. They divested anything, and uh they have Jews in Sered and in Nováky ...those are the two two remaining camps uh where they have able-bodied men making furniture for the state, for the government, you know uh just being used as uh slave labor, but they are surviving. Uh my father has access to food, so we send lots of parcels, lots of people uh parcels. There are some illegals around, but they get flushed out and that goes on. That's '43 and early '44.

Q:What is your family's relationship now to the rest of the Jewish community? You've been baptized.

A:Yeah.

Q:What are relationships like...?

A:No change at all. I mean everybody...I mean those few people who remained...these are personal relationships. I mean that's that's uh...Goldner (ph) and Strassman...it has nothing...we don't change our name. Uh I mean that is...you know, a rich Strassman now lives in a two, two-room hovel but you know, that doesn't change that Strassman is Strassman and and he's still Mr. Strassman. OK. So none of that changes. There is no change. Uh what you carry with you, unless you're totally degraded...uh what happens in concentration camp where you're absolutely stripped of everything, of dignity, but as long as you can keep your dignity, the fact that you're poor and you don't having clothing and that you have to be careful and so forth, doesn't matter. Absolutely doesn't matter. You can carry your human dignity whether you're in a slum or whether you are in a

plush, plush castle, or vice versa. You don't carry it. So on a human level there's absolutely no change. None.

Q:Early '44. What happens?

A: Early '44 things are starting to get interesting. Of course, the front is starting to roll over. In early '44, uh, there's a huge quisling army in the Slovak state. In fact, there are two divisions, each of about forty thousand men. Uh, they get rotated in and out of the eastern front. Uh, originally when the Germans are winning, the quisling army fights with the Nazis, although they're never really given front duty. They do sort of second echelon kind of duty. Uh, as soon as the Russians, after Stalingrad and coming to Kharkov, you suddenly start having defections from the Slovak army and you start creating a Czechoslovak Army in the Soviet Union. Of course there is a Czechoslovak army also in, in the west who escaped in '38 and '39. Uh, by early '44 the officer corps of the, uh, of the, uh, Czechoslovak army in, uh, in the west drops some officers down, and these are the officers with who, with whom they served prior to 1939 and they say look, we have to start getting ourself ready because the Germans are going to lose the war and so the officer corps uh decides that we are going to, uh, uh, attack the Germans when the time comes, when the...in order when the Russians come over the Carpathian rather than have destructive, hand-to-hand combat because everybody sees that when the front goes this way and that way through the Ukraine, there's nothing left...we are going to try to attack the Germans from the back.

Q:What happens to you and your family as all this is happening?

A:We don't know any of that.

Q:What I need to know...

A:We we are continue...we continue living, withdrawing more and more, although what loomed more and more importantly, and now we go out every weekend and now we start going out in February when it's cold and uh we start getting shoes, because the idea is that when the front will roll over we will leave where we are and go...disperse the family to the various people out there who are our loyalists, and we'll go and hide, because starting in '44 those Jews who remain, and there is about eight thousand Jews left over in all Slovakia, both legally and illegally and baptized, non-baptized, out of a population of, pre-war population of eighty-five thousand, so ten percent is left, which is still a very large number, although out of that eight thousand, a large proportion is in camps uh, you know, doing slave labor, but they are...they did not go to gas chambers. OK. I would reckon that about two thousand out of the eight thousand are actually interned in camps, working uh at no wages for the Slovak government. OK. Six thousand are dispersed for one reason or another, including, you know, uh, uh, women, Jewish women married to Christians and visa versa, mixed marriages and all kinds of exemptions and there was exemptions for American citizens and there was...I mean there was a whole list of exemptions. OK?

Q:Again, I need to pull you back.

A:And and our family just lived in that environment and starting in '44, everybody starts saying OK, now now uh when the war comes in, how do we survive, because everybody knows that uh when the front comes over uh the Germans are going to come in and then all the bets are off. In other words, all of the exemptions under which you live are going to be thrown out, because then uh you have a different law. You also must understand that the quisling government found it very convenient and so did the Germans uh to sort of have

their own order because that gives them jobs, nationalistic and what have you. And of course the Nazis had other fish to fry and as long as the quislings controlled things...OK. So you want to keep your eight thousand Jews or out of them _____. I'm going to worry about other things, you know, like the Hungarian Jews and the Romanian Jews and and the destruction of the Jews. Meanwhile I'm gassing the Jews, so I'm going to get to your Jews. OK. And there are documents to that effect, and so starting in early '44, the family starts becoming concerned about how to survive the transition and this is when these very bizarre plots get hatched, and everybody does them very secretly on their own. Uh some people are going to go what's called into a bunker. A bunker is some kind of a dug-out. You know, the mountains are strung with cellars, root cellars where you keep your carrots and your cabbages. I mean there's no refrigerator but you go below the frost line, you have sand in there and it's a mound of earth, a door. You creep in and you're going to stay there until liberation comes and you...uh the man who uh who uh married my wife...uh my my my sister, my sister, Ella, my older sister ... she's five years older than me...uh hatches this totally unlikely plot that he has a friend and this friend is a bricklayer. This bricklayer finds in that old house a corridor where he's going to make a false brick wall and my brother-in-law, uh Gejza uh is going to go and you know, when when when the quisling's government goes down and the Nazis come in, they all set it out. They set out bricks and mortar and all what he will do. On a night's notice he will able to go to this house, un crawl in at the end of the corridor, and this bricklayer is going to make a false wall, uh three feet on this side and Gejza going to be there, and there are going to be three false bricks to bring food in once day and take the excrements out and he's going to stay there. And by the way, that's what actually happened. The guy was behind that wall for eleven months. OK? And so every Jew then tries to concoct this this what's called the transition plot, OK, and some people have better plots. Some people have bad plots. Some people don't have plots. Some people believe in the cellar we can muddle through. Some people say, "no, nothing is going to happen and it's just going

to...suddenly we're going to be liberated." It's called the liberation scenario. So starting in '44, the liberation scenario becomes very important. At this particular time my father said, "Well we are going to take the option of dispersing the family. We're not going to be together. You're going to go here. You're going to go here...we go to here..." and these things...these are nego...these deals are negotiated. So that's what's early '44. Meanwhile the plots are being hatched and there is news that uh parachutists are dropping uh during the night, and you know, getting ready for the transition and so forth, because everybody is getting ready for for Germany to collapse any moment. Now this is early '44, again. Am I answering your...

Q:You are indeed. At this point I want to stop. Let us change tapes.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

TAPE #2

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q:Early '44?

A:Early '44 the quisling army, the two divisions that fight for the for the, uh, Slovak quisling government, uh, makes a deal with the London government [**NB:** the Czechoslovak government in exile] and the idea is that when the time comes to, uh, for the Russians to cross over the Carpathian mountains, uh, that government will come in, the Slovak army will attack the Germans in the mountain passes from the rear, hold ground until the army can come over and uh that's how it would be. We will liberate Slovakia. Uh, the deal is made, uh, in May, but that's when the news comes out what happened in Poland.[1] As you know...again it was a western inspired, western led uprising that uh led to the Russians stopping at the Visla [**NB:** Vistula], and letting the Germans wipe them out. So another meeting takes place and the idea now is to make a deal with the communists, who also have an army running under the Soviet command from the east, and say we are going to make this join and in order to cooperate with the with the uh Soviets we are going to put the communists in charge and so late in May a meeting is held where the communists are going to go Kiev where the headquarters of the uh Russian army is headed by a man by the name of Krushchev, Nikita Krushchev [**NB:** at this time, acting as Commissar of the Soviet partisans], and the timing of the Russian attacking is the mountain pass and the communist leadership now of the Slovak underground will be coordinated so we don't have a situation like in Poland. Turns out the communists don't keep their part of the deal. They actually never communicate with the Soviets. The communists were totally

[1] The Warsaw Revolt began in early August 1944.

different scenario and in fact they want to repeat the same thing that happened in Poland, and so the communists rather than wait for a coordinated army and underground and communists and Russian attack across the mountains, jump in guerrilla saboteurs early in August in large quantity into Slovakia and these saboteurs without any coordination with anybody, stopped the night train that goes from Berlin to Bucharest. Just happens on that train are twenty-eight German generals. Line them up on the railroad station in Ru_omberok and shoot them. The following day uh my father says "OK. This is it. We are going to go into our escape plan. We are going to execute our escape plan. We are going to disperse," and so that morning which is the 28th of uh 27th of August, 1944, uh we go and we get dropped off in the various villages and we stay there. Well it turns out that the Germans are a little slow to react. They take some retaliatory action which is local but there is no Sonderkommando, not anything. And also the uh the base which is the business, it still has to be run and so after two days in our locations, uh my uh my father is told uh look, you better come back. This is...you jumped the gun a little. You...it's premature. So the whole family retrieves from the pre-staged hiding places and we go back where we were. OK. Now this is a fatal mistake. But it leads...it's it's part of really not understanding what was really going on. Uh and because of course the Russians are not crossing the Carpathians. The Russians have no intentions of crossing. They just start a new offensive in Poland, so Slovakia is not even on the map of of being crossed. What the Germans meanwhile do is they just land Sonderkommandos for the sole purpose of disarming the Slovak army, the various Slovak, uh, uh, Slovak, uh, garrisons. They successfully disarmed the eastern division, which was the highly armed, which was the spear-head of this whole plot. They totally disarmed them and they shoot the, uh, the, uh, the key generals who staged it...who were going to stage that thing because all of this thing is leaked out. The western division, which is about thirty-five thousand men, um, just escape the garrisons before the Germans can get there to disarm them. The, the soldiers mutiny and just take to the mountains, and that happens late on

the 29th of August. At this particular point, the Germans come over and then the fighting starts between the the, uh, Slovak soldiers of the western division and the Germans. Uh, on the night of the 29th of August, uh, for reasons which I still don't understand, my father decided, "Why don't you sleep home tonight and just why, why don't you go and sleep somewhere else so that the whole family's not together," although we are still in Tren_ín. And I go to sleep at a house of a friend, uh, who was half-Jewish and they were workers and, and, and somehow...nobody every paid attention to them. I just slept there. Early in the morning I get the message during the night the Gestapo came and took twelve hostages, and my father was one of the hostages. They were...he was not taken as a Jew. He was taken as the head operator. Subsequently in '45, I find out that my father was involved in shipping food, uh, into illegal food caches that were being already staged starting in May, so that when the army starts holding against the Germans there is food already in the mountains being staged for the for the uh for the soldiers. So in the morning uh my father gets taken away. They were looking for me. All the males were going to be taken. I wasn't there. They just came in...they came in during the night. Again this was totally irregular. Whenever Jews were taken, you know, the local gendarmerie came with the bureaucratic procedure, and there was a time to be warned. The Germans...there was no warning. They just took, uh, uh, some some people who are involved, uh, in in the uprising. They were taken as hostages, and so now, uh, the message comes for my mother. You know, I never see my mother again. Uh, we cannot go back to where we were before. We blew our cover. We go to a fallback position. In other words, there were two layers of places to go to and so I leave the house where I was sleeping, with this friend, and go to an employee of my father who was in one of the villages outside of of of Tren_ín. My sister goes to another place. My mother goes to another place. So the family gets dispersed. We go into what's called bunker mode, which is you go somewhere and you're going to be hidden somewhere in a closet or something until the war blows over, but my father isn't there anymore. OK. My father

gets taken. Uh he gets tortured and he gets shipped to Sachsenhausen where he's killed, but he gets shipped with the uh uprising. Uh there's a whole group of people involved in the uprising who who gets uh who gets annihilated in Sachsenhausen. So I go over to the house of this this fallback, second position uh backup. And I'm there one night. In the morning the wife of this employee comes in all panicky. This employee had a young wife, recently married. He was a much older man. This was his second marriage. The girl was sort of a floozy or whatever and uh she comes in all alarmed. She's a new wife, and says, "Look...the Germans are doing house to house search," and by that time the Germans announced that "If we find any uh partisans, soldiers or Jews uh we are going to shoot them and also shoot every inhabitant in the house." So the wife gets very alarmed and this newly married older guy goes to me and says, "Look, why don't you just go away for the day out to the to the to the river where there are thrushes and bushes...you know, it's it's fairly wooded and near the river." Throughout the valley flows a river by the name of Váh and there are all kinds of hiding places. "Why don't you stay there? And uh then come back in the evening and we'll see how things go." Now remember...I'm fifteen years old, so I...and oh...and I get a sandwich. OK. I go in my sandals, in my short shoes, a shirt a belt and a sandwich, for the day at the river. Now you also must understand that through all of this time I know the area extremely well, and I'm a fabulous swimmer because we swim quite a bit in the river. It's a wild river. It has it has it has uh rapids too, and we swim through the rapids and so forth, but you know...and it's it's part of the training and oh...we swim through the river because we couldn't go to the only swimming pool there was in Tren_ín. Since 1940 Jews are not allowed to go to the swimming pool so you learn how to swim through the river, which is dangerous and full of rapids, but it's fun. I told you, you know, hardship creates fun too. So I go to the river and I sit there and during the day I see on the bridge the German tanks coming in and motorcycles and the Germans are really moving in. Now the Germans are coming in full force. The army has basically abandoned the garrison. There is a huge garrison in

Tren_ín. Tren_ín is a is a regiment headquarters. It's it's a strategic town. Always has been. It is...by the way, it is a strategic town since Roman times, so it's one of the old, old Roman camps. It's it's a throttle of the of the valley, and there I see the Germans going up and down. By about three o'clock in the afternoon I hear lots of shooting out in the mountains, which is in the direction which I knew very well which we...because we hiked there. And by four o'clock in the afternoon I decided I'm not going to go back to the house of this employee where his wife is not sure that really she she likes me and and so forth. It it's purely an instinct. It's it's...I don't know...you you learn it as an animal. There are certain survival uh instincts that you have and I say I will not be able to last there a couple of months. I mean you are fifteen years old but you can...you know now how to make calculations. And I say well, they are shooting so that means that that's good news, because you know, if they're shooting there that means that there are some friends out there. So about four o'clock in the afternoon I uh take off my shirt, take the sandals, tie them up on my head with my belt, and I go into the river and I swim down the river, under the bridges where the Nazis go up and down, and I swim for about five kilometers, totally out of range of the town, get out, know the area extremely well...we hiked there. It's a very picturesque area. It's it's it's a it's a valley surrounded by mountains on both sides, highly wooded, and I start marching late in the evening through the fields and and if you know that area these are small land-holdings and there are little paths, there are just millions of little paths between each property. This...these are not big fields and and there are there are tree lines and there are bushes so there is always a place to hide and I walk in my shorts in this thing and and again my not being sort of alienated, not being an urban Jew, I just walked through the fields and the, you know, the the peasants see me. You know, you say uh the right thing...you...there is, there is a way...you know, bless the God and you know, the answer...bless the Mary and you know you...there there are greetings because the peasants are really very religious. These are small semi-feudal kind of enclaves, uh but you can walk free right though those enclaves

and I get up to the mountain line. There is lots of shooting going on there, and I run into a bunch of soldiers. These are who from the Tren_ín garrison, and they are resting there with a machine gun and and rifles and what have you, and uh I say, "You know, I would like to join you." So the sergeant says, "You are a Jew aren't you?" "Yah, I am a Jew." He says, "Well, we...you know, you are just a kid. We don't...we are out for serious business on the...we are going to be fighting the Germans. Uh we can't have somebody...you have never shot a rifle. We don't need you." I said, you know, "But look, I I really need help." So they said, "Look, kid. Here is a hand grenade. We'll give you a hand grenade but just go away." So I say, "Well, what do you do with a hand grenade?" So the guy shows me how to unlatch a hand grenade, close the hand grenade, and puts me away. So I wander through the mountain (cough) for about a day with a hand grenade. I stop at...there is a hunting lodge up there and I go to the uh keeper of the hunting lodge and I said, you know, I would like some food. He gives me plenty of food. Of course, I carry the hand grenade. I'm quickly learning the trick how you get food. And so I wander around and then on the second or third day...I don't know which anymore...and of course I sleep out in the woods. I know how to do that. Although I've no clothing, there is a way of taking pine branches and sleeping out there. You you really can do that. I mean if if you...it's not that difficult. And there are lots of hay rakes, all over the place, in the mountains, so you can always take some straw out of a hay rake, make a bedding out of uh pine and then put straw on it and then cover yourself with straw...you can be very comfortable, and if it rains you go into a hay rake. There's all kinds of shooting going on all over the place, but it's very spotty. On this morning of the third day I suddenly see a tall figure coming up the path with obviously a heavy gun or something and I hide behind a tree, unlatch my hand grenade and when the guy passes me I just stick my hand with the hand grenade behind his back and said, "Give me your gun." The guy turns around and it is a officer who is in civilian clothing who is taking a heavy machine gun over. He's going to join the partisans. He's looking for the partisans

the way I am looking for them. So he said, "Kid, do you know what you're doing? I mean are sure you know how to put the pin back?" So uh, you know, after he identifies himself I finally put the pin back and say, "Well, you and I are going to go and look for the partisans together," so we walk for about a half a day, and then we come in at the bottom of the mountain range and there we see at the...from the edge of the forest on the road a bunch of guys... obviously not soldiers, funny looking guys, running around and there is a truck there, and so uh Kartal, the the officer, said, "You know, I'm going to cover you with the machine. Why don't you go down there and find out what those guys are...are they our side or what are they." See meanwhile of course the guards and the quislings also had uh civil guards and battalions and all kinds of arms things...I mean this was all mished, messed up, so I put my hand grenade and walked down, and there is this funny looking little squat guy and, uh, his only right hand and his left hand is chopped off and, uh, he carries Soviet stars on his on his epaulets. And, uh, it turns out to be one of these special commando groups that were dropped by the Soviets two weeks before, and these are really professional killers. These are real guerrillas. This is...these are people who have been through the Ukraine in a guerrilla warfare for two, three years, and they are collecting apparently squat. They just came from scouting around looking for the rail line and when they came, the rail line was too far away so I...they start immediately quizzing me and I say, well, I have a partner up there. They see a heavy machine gun. They say, "Well, we like you guys," so they immediately take the officer with the heavy machine gun. They need a heavy machine gun. Uh, they they say, "Well, what do we do with you kid?" And I say, "Well, you know, I really know this area very well," so the uh the Russian who's...you know, "you can really understand Russian reasonable well." This was the Ukrainian uh said, "you know, we really could use somebody who knows the local area to walk ahead of us and, you know, we'll dress you up in some ragged peasant stuff and you will just...we'll we'll use you as a as a guide to walk ahead of us, and if you want to keep the hand grenade you can keep the hand grenade as long as you don't show

it, and then you can always blow yourself up if they catch you." (Laughter) So, so, uh, I, I think this is a great...I think...I thought this was a fantastic deal, and so uh they logged me in and they signed me up right away, you know...we are put you in and uh then let's hop in the hop in the truck. We mount the machine gun on top of the truck in case we run into Germans or Gardists...these were called like guardists, like they were called "Garda." We go in into a village where apparently there is a base being made and there is...it's full of soldiers and there's arms all over the place and there's dynamite all over the place. I mean there was just just all the arms you wanted to see because the soldiers...this was...they vacated the garrisons, took all the arms and they all and all all the ammo with them and I say well could I at least have a rifle, so we go this through this long negotiation. OK. You can have a rifle. And uh I sleep, get fed pork. I really feel fantastic. I mean...I'm, I'm really...I mean this is a bunch of he-men. I'm clearly the youngest guy. Uh early in the afternoon somebody says well, do you know how to shoot. I say I don't even know how to load the thing, so they take me out and they say this is what you do and they show me how to how to shoot. In the morning uh this, this, this Russian comes. His name is "Batko" ...everybody's only known by their first name...comes and say, "Well, we're going to go for a raid. Uh we really have to find a rail line that is close to the forest so we can really get ourselves lined up in here. Uh we're taking you with us kid." So I go...but no rifle...peasant clothing, just the hand grenade in your pocket, so I go on the first raid. Now turns out that this was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me, because the army that fled and the communist government that got created, created actually an area, a liberated area. They declared it a Czechoslovak-liberated state. It was a hundred by two hundred kilometers. They decided to hold it until the Russians come. Now this was in September. This was another Warsaw Uprising, only on a much bigger scale and uh "Batko"'s orders was never stay in villages. Never stay put. Your job is not to fight Germans. Your job is to mess railroad, rail lines up. Now I didn't know that. Now one of the grave misfortunes

of the other Jews were that they came in...this was a liberated area. They joined the established environment. Many of the Jews who had fled to that area, and of course when the Germans cleaned it up by October 28th, everybody got annihilated and there are these hugh tank ditches that people dug which are full of bodies. You know, about eighty-five thousand people got killed in that that process. So we go on the first raid I think on the 4th of September, and uh I like it. I mean it is just great. You know, here are the guys. You know, there's eight of us, a machine gun, uh lots of ammo. Uh there are guys who are carrying the TNT...that's what we used, uh TNT. It's it's it's more powerful than than than dynamite but it's not like plastique, and these are little uh metal boxes about this big, this wide and uh it's a real charming group. Uh a commando squad is a very unusual dynamics. In other words, in no time everybody knows he is dependent on everybody, so I mean nobody says "I'm a Jew," or anything like that. I mean it's just, you know, "Hey, kid. You know, you going to walk ahead of us, you know. We we really need you." And so I lead them through the mountains and uh we go further north of Tren_ín. See, below Tren_ín the valley widens and the railroad track hugs the river so it's about two, three kilometers away from the mountains. Once you go north of Tren_ín, you are in a narrow valley and the railroad tracks sort of snakes in and out and there are dozens of places where you can come fairly close to the railroad without being seen. So I take them there. They are very pleased uh with with that, and uh so we march during the day, ducking the villages. Of course the peasants see us, but everybody turns around. You know, they don't want to see us and uh we go...starts raining. We come to the edge, edge of the forest early in the evening and we are just going to sit there and wait. I I'm not sure I know what's going on, but "Batko" obviously knows. He must have done it dozens and dozens of times. He sets up the machine gun so that if if uh the troops would come against us...the idea is to have a high ground. The railroad is down, and we find, as I will show you later on a photograph, it's an embankment. We sit at the edge of the forest. There is an embankment below us where we sit will sit up the machine gun and

then uh then a few of us will go to the track. Uh as soon as it gets dark uh "Batko" uh says "OK, let's go to the track. And why don't you come with us." So three of us go down to the track. Why he took me, I don't know. We go to the track. We lay the TNTs right on to the rail. And the the the trick is in demolition...this is not what you see in movies, John Wayne movies...there is no way how you can carry enough ammo to blow up a train sky high. To blow up a train sky high you would have to be on a bridge. You would have to know exactly where the bridge pins are. The bridges were usually in populated areas. There was no way; and they were guarded and it was too risky. The real trick is to get the train derail itself. The way how you do it is you find a place where the track is slightly on a curve. The way a train runs is that the it has flanges, sort of...in other words, the way, the reason a train doesn't derail is because the wheels are open on the outside but if pieces of steel going down so that the piece of steel always presses against the lip of the rail and the trick then is to blow up the heaviest part of the train, which is the tender. In other words, the steam...these are steam locomotives by the ways...the heaviest part of the train is where you have the water and the coal, which is usually about fifteen meters behind the front of the train. I mean, these are standard-sized locomotives and the way "Batko" explains it all you have to do is knock out the rail under the tender, the heavy part, and derail the tender. The tender will tip over and pull the rest of the train down from the embankment. So you know, this is an art form. So far as "Batko" is concerned, derailing trains is an art form. The...and then he, of course, he is full of stories. You know, as we sit there he tells me stories. He is a very lively kind of a guy. Uh again, the squad is eight people, three Russians and five Slovaks of whom four are communists (including one of them who fought in the Spanish civil war), so that's that's the squad and the guy who fought in the Spanish Civil War, it's it's a father and a son so there's father and son in the squad. That's that's the makeup of the squad. Get along very well. And uh the idea then is to lay the TNT under the rail, connect a fuse so that when the first wheel of the steam engine comes and crushes the fuse it will ignite the

detonator. OK? And the detonator then will ignite a cord and the cord goes at the rate of one second every twenty centimeters, so that the speed of the train is about forty miles an hour, thirty miles an hour, you need a cord approximately four feet long so that when the first wheel detonates the thing, the train will have passed approximately fifteen meters and it will blow right under the wheel of the tender. Again this is this is...now we're doing with professionals. The problem with most of the partisans that existed and the stories that you hear about partisans...these were all amateurs. This is this is this is killer stuff. Highly specialized. So uh we lay the TNT. We lay the fuse, but we don't put the fuse on top of the rail, because we are going to do it only when we get a freight train. We don't want to blow up a passenger train. Uh and so that's how we do it for the first time. Uh we know by sound how this thing works. Uh we can tell a freight train. "Batko" knows how to tell a freight train. We go back to the embankment about midnight, maybe eleven o'clock. I don't remember. By that time it rains. The field that is between the embankment...you know, it's only about two hundred meters but it's a it's a soggy field and uh between the field there is a path which is beaten but everything else has been plowed. I mean this is September. This is a wheat field. It has been plowed, and "Batko" says, "You just make sure that you're in there where the path is." So we go back up. When the uh when when "Batko" says, "I've seen we've got a freight train," and we go back up on the embankment and we crouch against the embankment and we wait until we see the lights of the freight train. You have to see the lights of the freight train because if the Germans have what's called a draisienne [**NB:** a handcar], which is a little platform or a a little armored car ahead of it...they usually used to push a flat car...later by the way they had hostages on the on the flat car with them from the local villages but this time they didn't...you want to make sure they don't blow up the uh flat car. And of course this was still early, and I don't think on the first train the Germans expected anything. You know, they used a rail car. This is the main rail line between Danube and Poland by the way. This is the train line from Bratislava to _ilina to Katowice, and the Germans did

not know whether the Russians are going to attack through the Danube Valley or through the Vis_a [**NB:** Vistula] Valley, so those three lines that were going north-south were critical to the ability of the Germans to shift troops back and forth. They were running out of troops, out of out of troops and out of uh the ability to defend, so those three lines were very dependent. The Ukrainian command had four squads who had nothing else to do except keep those lines, lines harassed. And by the way, when you blow up that line, usually it gets cleared up in about a half a day. The the objective...Yah, I mean you cannot disable the line unless you blow up a bri...a major bridge which you couldn't do. I mean the bridges were extremely well defended. That's the first thing the Germans took care of. All you can do is make it difficult for the Germans, make them go slow, uh divert arms, go into com... and and deploy troops to keep the lines clear so you you really...it's a harassing act. It's it's it's it's it's a bee bite. It's not deadly stuff, but that's what guerrilla warfare is all about. So so uh we have to wait until we see the lights of the of the uh of the of the train, and as we go back to arm this thing, uh "Batko," who is going to do that, hands over to me the detonators. It's a box. The the the detonators are in a box. It's it's a sort of leather pouch. These are little cartridges about this big. It has uh fulminate of mercury. If you hit it, it explodes. It's...these are the igniters that you have in all ammunition. And while he's fitting the fuse he holds, asks me to hold uh that leather box which is lined with cotton and has these detonators. Now what I didn't know was that we had more TNT than we had detonators. We were short in detonators. And so this train keeps coming. You see the lights and there is "Batko," you know, uh mounting this detonator on that fuse and I'm pretty cool and uh as I hand it to him I spill all the detonators right on the uh embankment, which is made out of gravel and "Batko" says, "You better get those." I mean...and and this this is serious stuff. So...and he starts running off the embankment because the train is coming. I stand there on the embankment, pick up the detonators, put them in my pocket, you know. And when I picked up all the detona....by that time I have light from the train. I just start running

down the embankment and I miss the, it's called the "medza"...the the little space between fields where you can walk is called a "medza." And uh I miss it, so I hit the plowed wet field, which is really a potfull of mud and I just uh go, you know, maybe uh twenty feet or something and then I see the train sort of chugging and I look over my shoulder and I say, "Well, this is just about when it's going to blow." I hit the ground and the train blows. And you could see the front end of the car and the engine slowly....it's like slow motion...it sort of...it's it's funny, you know. I could see it like today. It just blows and then slowly starts going off the embankment and then pulls the front cars. The front cars had some tanks on it. I mean it was a troop train, and in the middle was...the Germans had uh uh you know machine gun nests and you hear, pop...it's there what you call flares, and the way a flare works, a flare gun...it's a big barrel gun. It's a rocket. You hear the pop. It's like on Fourth of July. You always hear the ignition and the take-off and it only ignites when it gets up on the top. So I stay on the ground. You know, I I hear, I feel the hot stuff uh from the from the steam escaping from the from the train and the iron's flying around but didn't hit me, and there I see a white light coming down. They've shot it over very far, and of course "Batko" by that time was scrambling up the embankment and so they started shooting at him. Didn't hit him. So as soon as the flare dies out, I start running down the field. Now maybe the Germans had only one flare gun, or maybe the guy who's shooting the flare gun was very slow, but the the uh you know there were intervals, enough intervals between the uh flare guns that I could always...when I hear a pop I hit the ground and waited, and of course they were raking with machine gun fire with tracers over the field. They didn't know what they were shooting at. Uh they didn't see that there was an embankment actually going up. They were just sort of raking at eye level. And I made it up the embankment. You know, it's it's...you will see from the picture...it's it's not a big distance but it's an interminable distance under fire. And uh uh our guys didn't shoot back. It it...our guys were going to shoot back only, because then you reveal your fire and then you draw fire. You only shoot when you see the troops

dismounting and pursuing. Yeah, you only shoot against...I mean these were professionals. I mean amateurs would have popped their guns, you know, started shooting willy nilly and then the Germans would have shooted willy nilly, and but these were really professionals, particularly the guy from the Spanish civil war. This was a cool cucumber. I mean this guy was an absolute professional killer. Uh by the way, this guy after the war became the uh head of a trial. He was the head judge that hanged Tiso. He was the...he became a judge. This this one judge you wouldn't want to come in front of. At any rate, a great guy. So I get up the embankment and they were lying down there. They were waiting for me. One one of the things in a commando squad is, in a professional commando squad, you don't let your guys hang around. Now if they get wounded, you shoot them. OK. Because you don't want them to fall into enemy hands, but but there's a funny ethic in a in that kind of attack, that that you really protect your people. You don't have that many and so they said OK, you made it. Did OK. So then we go up in the mountain and and uh we uh we stop and uh at a little clearing and of course we hear the crackle from there and the Germans are firing firing wildly but it's dark, it's raining, so you know, the the bullets are not even coming close to us. And uh "Batko" says "OK, now let's regroup." He pulls out his pistol and points it at me..."You lost our caps. We cannot go on another raid. You lost my caps. That's punish...punishable. You know, we're going to shoot you, you Jew kid!" you know. And I said, "Well, what do you mean? I got them." And I go in my pocket and I pulled the detonators out of my pocket and everybody sort of goes to the side (laughter). "This kid"...I mean, "how did you make it because you know, if you would have hit it...I mean if you hit it like that, you would have blown" ...apparently I was totally oblivious to it but the mud was so soft that whenever I hit the ground...I mean it would have tore off my leg. So this "Batko" says, "Boy, are you lucky. You are so lucky. We we're going to put you right into the squad. We need a little luck," so so I became as a result of that uh the member of the squad and uh then they took me back and they trained me how to do it,

and uh then I did a number of raids with them. Uh "Batko" was sort of a braggart. I mean he was a real braggart and one day we were just mov...coming back from a raid and we were very tired. "Batko" says, "I'm not going to slug through the mountains," because we used to go off the paths and what have you. This was al... already in October. Things were getting pretty tough and the German patrols were all over the place, and he said, "We are we are just going to go on the road," and we said, you know, "You can't do that." "Oh, we're going to go down the road." So we say, "Well, we're going going to walk in the ditch," because I mean to walk in the middle of the road during the day it was, it was insane. He says, "I'm just too tired to to slug through the ditch." Again, it was raining and sloshing and what have you. So we walked down the road, and suddenly a German patrol came up. They had a machine gun and this crazy "Batko" stood in the middle of the road with his uh PTS, which is this this Russian uh automatic with the seventeen...it looks like gangster...it's a knock-off of a Al Capone gun. And he stands in the middle of the road and the...you know...that patrol truck with a machine gun on top, stands there and shoots...stands...he doesn't, didn't budge. You know, we were in the ditch. And he just stands and they just cut him down. He was going to get that truck. So we lost him, and after that the squad just didn't have luck. I mean, we just...the other two Russians were not very good. Uh, I, I don't know why, but, but, but just the luck ran out of it and then, uh, on November 2nd, uh, we had the misfortune to get mixed up in a fight that we really didn't belong to. Uh, the Germans always tried to move the partisans that were remaining. By, you know, by the 28th they cleaned up the fixed position, they destroyed the army, the soldiers were fighting with tanks. The Jews...there was a two hundred-man Jewish brigade from Nováky who was given on open field the job of holding the line for retreating soldiers ... against advancing German tanks. I mean total slaughter, and then the Germans had Ukrainians Sonderkommandos, not German, to go after the remainder of the troops...uh you know, just driving us up into little enclaves, surrounding us and then just wiping us out because these were extremely skilled anti-guerrilla uh operations.

I mean these were professional operations for uh getting rid of guerrillas. I mean there's there's are whole ways how you go after guerrillas. And uh I think that the the two Russians sort of wanted to to to sort of keep with others because of food or whatever and so in November we got uh we joined a bigger group because we were going to move our base and we got caught, surrounded on the mountain. I mean there was snow by that time. It was snowing by that time. You know, it was like a foot of snow and uh they drove us on a mountain which had the...was surrounded on one side with the river, on the other side with a with a road and uh they were just firing uh uh shrapnel all day into the mountain. We were taking heavy, heavy casualties. You see, in those days when you took a...when you were wounded, you were...you might as well shoot yourself and so uh they were shooting at us all day and then during the night they went after us, which was very unusual, and the way they went after us, they pretended that they were Russians. These were Vlasov ...these were the Vlasov guys, and so I got separated in November from the, from the squad. That night uh I and another guy from the squad, who by the way was a criminal. You know, the the makeup of of this group was...got more and more unsavory as time went on, and as we were on the ridge of the mountain and we just rolled down the mountain and uh we crossed the river. Now this was November...iced river, all slippery, in snow, and we waded the river and uh we escaped the the uh surrounding, but everybody else was involved got either captured, or shot, or killed. Uh I think there must have been something like two hundred partisans on that mountain. I think only about twenty, thirty got away, and uh soaking wet uh we started marching east. By that time we decided we are going to just move towards the front, and uh then I joined another brigade and then starting in December we started slowly fighting our way east. I only went on one more raid in January, and by that time I had pleurisy and I was bleeding and...I was...after February I didn't fight anymore. I couldn't. I mean just could hardly walk. Uh I crossed the lines about uh four hundred kilometers east of where I joined the partisans. In other words, we started walking towards the Russian front, and we finally

crossed the line on March 25th, 1944 [**NB:** This must be 1945, since he joined the partisans in Sept. 1944], so I joined the partisans on the 4th of September and joined the Czechoslovak army...it turned out when we crossed the front we ran into the Czechoslovak brigade. It was coming out of Soviet Union. Uh the Russians immediately got separated from us because they were all suspect of being collaborators, using the partisans purely as being a cover for them and there was quite a bit of that so they...all the Russians immediately the moment we crossed the front immediately went for interrogation by the NKVD. Uh early in uh March we also picked up five Americans fliers who were wandering through the mountains who uh who had been shot down and who who just stayed with the partisans, although they refused...this was a very peculiar thing...they refused to carry arms because they were protected by the Geneva Convention if they didn't carry arms and you know, we told them..."Look, you guys,...I mean I mean, you're not going to enter a long debate with, with, with the Sonderkommando when they catch you." No, they didn't want to carry arms. Uh we also picked up an agent from the British ISA uh OSS. The misfortune of that guy was that apparently he was carrying quite a bit of cash and gold on him. He was dropped that way and uh the Russians accused him of being a spy and they shot him. I mean there's some really ghastly stories I could tell you. I mean pretty ghastly stuff. But I didn't get wounded. I was just just totally, you know, physically and mentally worn out and had abscesses and sores all over the place. I mean a real sorry state. I think I must have weighed, and lost, less than a hundred pounds when I crossed the lines. I got immediately picked up uh by the Czechoslovaks and they shipped me to the hospital and I stayed in the hospital during the month of April. Uh I had all the food...I mean just couldn't have enough food. And uh on the 20th of April, I volunteered to to the Czechoslovak army to go back to the front, so then I uh was inducted in, back into the regular army and uh as we went through the induction period, you know, suddenly there is a colonel there and he said, "You know, you have this unbelievable military record here. Uh we need you in uh really in a special

assignment. We are going to send you to officer school," and I said, you know, "But the war will be over!", I said. "Oh, we'll make you an officer in two weeks." So I was sent uh on the 20th of April to a real quickie battlefield officer school. Turned out it was a school of what do you do with collaborators. They needed sort of a few people that would come over and uh go through Sudetenland. I mean there was some...all of that thing was laid out so I uh...at graduation they discovered that I was only sixteen years old. Until then, nobody asked me and they just couldn't make me an officer, so they made me a non-commissioned officer, whatever that means. So immediately after liberation I was shipped uh to Bratislava. Uh, of course I stopped home. Nobody was there. I found out that my sister and my mother were both picked up uh in October in, you know, in their hiding places. So my instinct was right. I mean the staying in the hiding place would have been just terrible. And uh so I went to Bratislava, and we started hunting the Nazis and I did that for about four months and the thing just got too ghastly for me. I mean I mean I mean we we just did pretty rotten things and and uh we we uh settled scores. I mean it was a pretty wild period. And uh then my sister came back from the concentration camp in June, and I just told my superiors I had enough of this thing. You know, I just didn't have the stomach, so uh they said, "Well uh most of the Nazis fled anyway so we don't have as big a job to do as we thought we have to do and besides you're sixteen years old," and uh there were some other reasons. They say, "Well why don't you just go home?" So I was honorably discharged from the army and then I went home. At the age of sixteen, a non-commissioned officer, uh gun-toting, uh no education, uh no schooling since '39, '40, and uh and I decided, had to decide what to do with myself and my decision was when I went back uh to Slovakia and and I saw the accumulation of grudges...and it has nothing to do with the communist plot or anything like that. It's just...the the totalitarian regime, the the bureaucratic structure, the the theft, the institutionalized theft, the legalized uh destruction of people...I concluded at the age of sixteen that that regardless what...and you know, I was going to get the property back

and since I was the sole male heir of a huge, huge property, factories and God knows what because my uncles got killed and everything else, you know, uh there was every reason for me to stay there and I said I'm just not going to do it, so I walked out in January of 1948, before the communists took over. Just walked out. I went first to Paris. Then I went to London. There was a friend of my father's, not family, who uh sort of picked me up and uh very dear friend of my father's. He was not married and uh he sort of fed me, put me through school, private tutoring, and I arrived in uh in England early in February 1948 and then I finally got a visa to, as as an orphan, to America and I arrived in America in October of 1948.

Q:Take a couple of minutes, and we have a couple of minutes...

A:Yeah.

Q:Tell us what your adjustment to the United States has been.

A:That's a long story. That's a long story. Uh, you know, so far as I'm concerned, America...the gold is on the streets. You can just pick it up. You know, you know...that was my vision of America. I was dreaming about America when I was still starving and marching. And I don't know why. You know, just going to America...that was going to be the thing. I wanted to have peace. I just wanted to have peace. So my adjustment was that I just wanted to have peace and raise a family.

Q:What do you think the effect of the war has been on you?

A:I think it has been very good. I think it has been very good. I think that uh...I know this is almost a sacrilege to say, but I'm a better person for that. But I'm just a lucky one. There

are very very few who are able to to walk through the war without the ultimate degradation, the dignity to human to humanity. See, I was always a person. I could always stand up. I never owed anything to anybody. And I think the biggest crime, and it's not just the Nazis although that's an extreme form, is the degradation and demoralization, the the the total helplessness that people get in an environment. And the great thing about America, you can be whatever you want to be, and uh I think I'm a much better person for that.

Q:Tell us what you do now.

A:Well, uh like my father I always have an obligation to society and uh uh I came in in uh '48. I was very lucky to be accepted to the only school in America that gave full tuition uh scholarship to every student, which is Cooper Union. Cooper Union in New York is the only place I could afford going. I couldn't even afford going to City College because I didn't have $130 to pay for lab fees. And uh always wanted to be an engineer. Always, since a child. I went to HIAS on Lafayette Street in '48 when I arrived and uh I went to the counselor and I said, you know, "I want to be an engineer," and they say, "Kid, you know, you have no education, no schooling, nothing. And you have no money and we don't know what to to say." I say, "Well, I just want to be an engineer," so so finally the counselor in desperation said "You know, around the corner is this crazy school that everybody who gets in gets paid everything. Why don't you try them out?" So I went to this this Cooper Union and I talked to the admission officer and he said, "You know, it's pretty tough. Have you ever taken an SAT?" I said, "Well, what's an SAT?" "Well, you know, fill these forms and what have you." My English was pretty poor so I sat for an SAT exam without any of the cultural background, as you must understand, to take a multiple choice forms...it is a pretty crazy thing. Turned out that because of Cooper Union rating...my English was terrible, but for spacial relationships I got a perfect score.

You know, when you turn a cube this way, is it like this cube or that cube? I thought it was a game. I got into computer, uh Cooper Union, but not...I got in because somebody backed out, so I went to Cooper Union, worked my way through Cooper Union, and uh met my wife at Cooper Union. And then uh I felt I was not sufficiently educated and then I uh got a scholarship to MIT Sloane School--and uh just to tell you the attitude, although I was totally abjectly poor, I...you know, I wore work clothing that I...second-hand clothing--I refused to take the scholarship. I said, "I'm going to work my way through through through MIT and the reason is the Strassman's don't take charity from anybody." So I walked, uh went and got a Master's Degree in Industrial Management and I did the first dissertation in the United States of business application of computers. I just happened to fall into computers in 1954. I mean this was just just just just a stupid piece of luck. The only place where there was a computer and so I stayed with computers since '54 and if you got into computers in '54, honestly, you were a total idiot. I mean, you know, just just couldn't do wrong. So I stayed with computers my entire career until retirement in 1985, when I was the Chief Information Executive for the Xerox Corporation worldwide. I managed computers for General Foods, Kraft and Xerox, but I stayed my entire career, uh thirty years, in computers. Didn't change, and now I'm retired and uh I write. I teach. I have two professorships and uh I serve on a six-man board to the Secretary of Defense uh again helping out on on how to manage computers for increasing the defense of the United States.

Q:On that note we stop.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

TAPE #3

PHOTOGRAPHS

(1)Taken is Slovakia in 1990. Shows scene of northbound railroad tracks near fields and mountains, 500 yards from the site of partisan sabotage described in the interview.

(2)Same as photo #1, different view. Shows nearby field and embankment, as described in interview.

(3)Same as photos #1 and #2, third view. Woods and mountains.

(4)Paul Strassman in Czechoslovak Army uniform, May 1945.

(5)2 medal awarded to Paul Strassman by the Czechoslovak government for his participation in the partisans during the Slovak National Uprising.