



Study Guide

Frank Blaichman: Jewish Partisan Platoon Commander

Born in the small town of Kamionka, Poland, on December 11, 1922, Frank Blaichman was sixteen years old when the German army invaded his country in September 1939.

The several hundred Jews of Kamionka had lived a peaceful life prior to the invasion, experiencing few incidents of antisemitism. Frank's grandmother owned a grocery store, and his father made a living buying grain from farmers in the area, selling it in nearby towns and in the city of Lublin.



Taking All Sorts of Risks

Within months of the invasion, German officials issued a host of administrative decrees and regulations that were intended to isolate the Jews, deprive them of their livelihoods, and dispossess them of their property. Jews were now required to wear armbands bearing the Star of David; they couldn't travel outside Kamionka without special permits; they were ordered to turn over any valuables, such as gold and jewelry; their businesses were confiscated; and they were subject to seizure for forced labor.

Young Frank immediately began taking all sorts of risks in an effort to help his parents and his six brothers and sisters survive these hardships. He had a bicycle and rode from the neighboring farms and villages to Lubartow (six miles to the east) and Lublin (twelve miles to the south), buying and selling goods at each destination. He purchased honey, chickens, butter, grains, and meat from the farmers and sold these products in the cities; and in the cities he bought tobacco, yarn, and saccharin to sell to the farmers.

Refusing to wear the Star of David armband, Frank took to the road without the required travel permits. Having had contact with many Polish farmers at his grandmother's store, Frank spoke Polish fluently, and he was able to travel among the Polish population without being recognized as a Jew. When riding on the main roads became more dangerous, he avoided the police and German soldiers by traveling through the fields, often carrying over one hundred pounds of goods on his bicycle.

Month by month, life became harder. Jewish men were assigned to forced labor, and Frank was assigned to work two days a week in the fields of a nearby estate where potatoes, sugar beets, and other crops were grown. Once again he took risks, choosing to pay someone to take his place in the field so that he could continue to ride his bicycle and engage in trade.

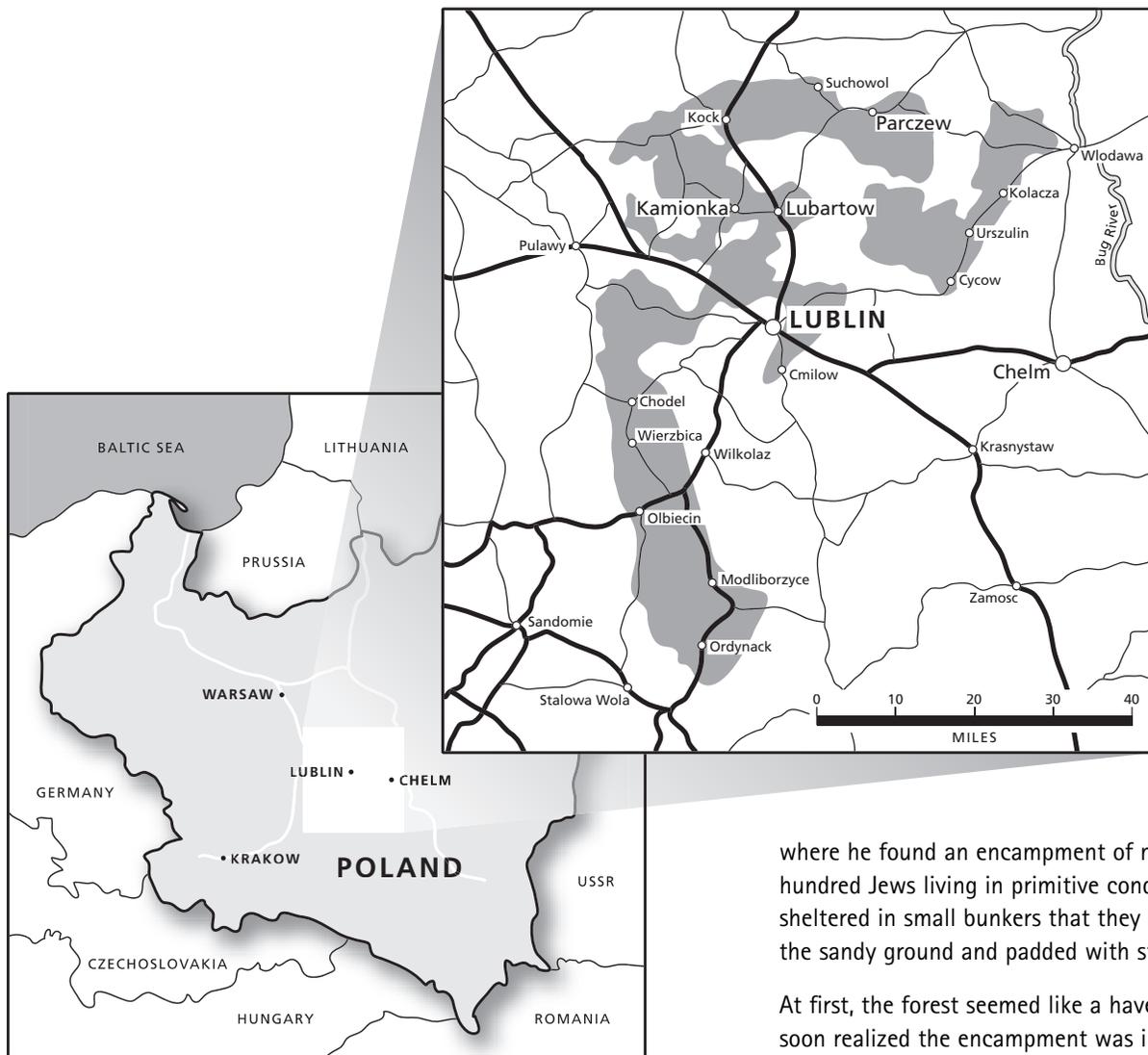
By 1942, the situation was becoming dire. The community suffered from hunger and disease, was terrorized by harassment, raids and random shootings, and heard more and more frequent rumors of mass killings and deportations to death camps. One of Frank's uncles was shot on the spot when the Germans made a surprise search and discovered fresh meat in his house, and a cousin met a similar fate when fresh bread was found in her house.

Freedom at Any Cost

In October 1942, when the Judenrat (Jewish councils that carried out Nazi orders) informed the Jews of Kamionka that they were going to be resettled in a ghetto in Lubartow, Frank slipped away and hid in a bushy area outside of town. He was determined not to go freely into the ghetto and to keep his freedom at any cost, even if it meant never seeing his family again.

He was on friendly terms with many of the non-Jewish farmers in the area, and one had said Frank could come to him if he ever needed help. When he went to the farmer's home, the family

Frank Blaichman, Kamionka, Poland.
Source: Jewish Partisan Educational
Foundation Archives.



Poland in 1942. The shaded areas on the detailed map indicate the territory in which Frank's group was active.

greeted Frank warmly, fed him, and tried to console him. They prepared a bed for Frank in the house, but he insisted on sleeping in the barn to lessen the danger to which they were exposing themselves. The Germans had made clear their policy to shoot any Poles who let Jews into their homes or who gave assistance to Jews in any way.

Frank soon learned that Kamionka's Jews had not been relocated to the ghetto in Lubartow; the farmer told him that the Germans had put them on trains to some other, unknown destination. Frank realized that his family and many relatives, together with the rest of Kamionka's Jewish community, had probably been taken to a death camp.

Hearing that there were Jews hiding in a small forest near Bratnik, Frank decided to leave the family that had sheltered him for two days. He had no idea how long they could safely look after him, and he decided it would be better to be with his own people. He made his way to the forest

where he found an encampment of more than one hundred Jews living in primitive conditions, sheltered in small bunkers that they had dug into the sandy ground and padded with straw.

At first, the forest seemed like a haven, but Frank soon realized the encampment was in constant danger of being discovered. Moreover, when women left the encampment to go to nearby villages for food, they were threatened by Polish hoodlums who called them antisemitic names and robbed and beat them. Frank encouraged the men to organize a defense unit to guard the camp and fight against the hoodlums. "We had no firearms," says Frank. "The only thing we had was the will and the courage."

In all, twelve young men volunteered for this work, and they appointed as their commander a man who had served in the Polish army. He instilled discipline and led the men through practice drills in which they held sticks and pitchforks over their shoulders as if they were carrying rifles. Nineteen-year-old Frank was immediately involved in policy making for the group because he had good judgment, was very courageous, and knew the psychology of the Polish farmers very well.

A Major Turning Point

Frank's first successful mission came in December 1942 when he heard there was a local farmer bragging that he had a hidden cache of guns. He went to the farmer's house accompanied by a companion who looked Russian. Wearing a Soviet paratrooper jacket he had found, Frank told the farmer he had just come from Moscow and was there to organize a Polish partisan group. He asked the farmer to hand over his guns voluntarily, saying he and his companion would use force to get them if necessary. The farmer relinquished his hidden firearms and told Frank about a neighbor who also had a hidden cache of weapons. By night's end, Frank and his companion had obtained a supply of six rifles, ammunition, and a handgun.

A major turning point came when Frank's group captured two German collaborators. These informers had been trained and paid by the Germans to hunt for Jews and to spy on the civilian population. After their capture, the spies confessed: they gave Frank's group the names of other collaborators and admitted to having killed Jews for their valuables and to having turned over other Jews to the Germans. Frank's unit killed the two men, and almost overnight his group became notorious. Although there were some villagers who resented the fact that Jews had killed two Poles, a great many were pleased to see the spies dealt with and some even offered Frank their congratulations and offers of assistance. Frank's unit, surprised to learn that they were now viewed with a combination of respect, admiration and fear, grew increasingly confident and courageous.

The group's achievements, however, were countered by terrible setbacks. Early one morning, German soldiers, acting on information given to them by Polish spies, attacked the encampment in the forest and over eighty Jews were murdered. Frank was one of twenty-two who survived.

Realizing that the small forest didn't offer enough protection, Frank's group began to seek shelter in the more secluded villages, splitting up into smaller groups, keeping on the move, and hiding in the farmers' homes and on their property. This turned out to be more effective than staying in the forest, especially during the harsh winter, as the farmers provided them with shelter and cooked meals. Some farmers were truly friendly to

the Jewish partisans, but many no doubt cooperated only because they were afraid that the armed Jews might retaliate if they didn't get the help they requested. Frank did his best to maintain good relations with the villagers and was always proud of the fact that his unit made every effort not to harm innocent people.

Over time, Frank's group increased in size. Early in 1943 his unit joined forces with refugees from the town of Markuszow, and the expanded unit now numbered sixty fighters.

In the spring of 1943, when Frank was walking across a muddy field, he saw a man approaching and asked him to identify himself. When the man responded by saying "Amcha," Frank realized he was Jewish. Amcha was a Hebrew greeting meaning "Your people" and Jews in hiding used this code to identify each other. It was in this way that Frank met Samuel "Mietek" Gruber, who had escaped with twenty-eight other men from a prisoner of war camp in Lublin. Gruber's group had fought in the Polish army before being captured by the Germans, and they were experienced fighters who knew how to handle explosives and mine railroads and army convoys. Gruber and his men joined Frank's group, which provided them with firearms.

Frank's partisan unit, known as the Markuszow group and headed by Iser Eisenberg, became a disciplined fighting force. They effectively dealt with spies and collaborators in the area, disrupted communication by destroying telephone lines, damaged dairy factories that produced food for the Germans, and ambushed German patrols.

A Great Fighter

By September 1943, one of the Polish partisan organizations, the underground army called Armia Ludowa (People's Army), realized that Frank's unit could be a dependable ally in the fight against the Germans and provided them with much needed supplies. Previously armed with old rifles and handguns, Frank's group was now given explosives, hand grenades, land mines, machine guns, submachine guns, mortars, anti-tank guns, and all the ammunition they needed. All this modern and new equipment was coming from the Soviet air force, which was assisting the Polish partisans by parachuting weapons to them.

More Information on the Jewish Partisans

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information.

Books

The Defiant

by Shalom Yoran

Uncle Misha's Partisans

by Yuri Suhl

Defiance

by Nechama Tec

Films

Come and See, a film about Russian partisans. Available for rental in some independent video stores, and available in VHS and DVD through Amazon.com.

The Partisans of Vilna, a film by Aviva Kempner. Available for rental in VHS, in some independent video stores.

Resistance: Untold Stories of the Jewish Partisans, available for purchase through PBS.org. Future screening on PBS stations planned in the near future.

Web Sites

www.jewishpartisans.org
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/jpart.html>

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Frank's group committed many acts of sabotage against the Germans. They dynamited bridges and railroad tracks, made hit-and-run attacks on trains that were carrying military supplies and soldiers to the front, ambushed German trucks and military cars, and bombed German headquarters in several towns in the area. Frank was a vital member of his unit; he had a great sense of direction and knew the forest and surrounding area extremely well. "He knew how to avoid the Germans," says Samuel Gruber of his fellow partisan. "He was a great fighter."

Even when Frank's group began working together with units of the People's Army, they never trusted the Polish partisans one hundred percent because they knew that many were antisemitic. When the People's Army gave Frank's group an assignment and said it would require twelve men, the Jewish partisans responded by saying, "We'll take six of ours and six of yours to do the mission." "We were not naïve," says Frank, "that's what made us successful."

In 1944, Frank's group received an order from the People's Army headquarters to move east and join forces with another Jewish partisan unit active in the Parczew area, which had a large and dense forest. The new, all-Jewish unit that was formed had as its commander Yechiel Greenspan, a capable leader whose men protected a large encampment of about two hundred Jews living deep in the Parczew Forest. Samuel Gruber was appointed deputy commander, and Frank Blaichman, at the age of twenty-one, became the unit's youngest platoon commander.

The new unit received visits from many prominent men. The head of the People's Army, General Rola Zymierski, came in May 1944 for a three-day conference with Frank's partisan unit. The general was very sympathetic to Jews; he asked the men about their families and told them they had to stay in the area at all costs, even if they had to hide in pairs of two, because the German front would soon be coming through.

They also had a visit from several leaders in the Polish left-wing underground movement. One prominent visitor, Edward Osóbka-Morawski, would be the first prime minister of the Polish government in Lublin after the area was liberated from the Germans. The future prime minister and his colleagues were in need of an armed escort to make sure they crossed safely over the Bug River, moving from the German-occupied zone to the

Russian-occupied zone where a plane was waiting to take them to Moscow. Frank was one of twelve men assigned to the job, which was carried out successfully.



Recent photo of Cesia and Frank Blaichman. Source: Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Archives.

End of the War

In July 1944, the Soviet Red Army moved in from the east and entered the area where Frank's partisan unit was fighting. The German tanks and troops retreated. "How happy we were," says Frank, about seeing the Russian forces move in. "We started to celebrate with them, kissing and hugging and so on." Then, "after we got sobered up, we were thinking of our comrades who didn't make it to live to the day."

After the war ended, Frank met up again with a young woman named Cesia Pomeranc, whom he had first gotten to know while fighting in the Parczew area. Cesia's two brothers were members of Yechiel Greenspan's partisan unit, and for a few months she had helped prepare meals for Frank and his comrade Marian Dworecki. She and Frank married, and six years later they settled in the United States. They now have two children and six grandchildren.

Frank takes pride in the contribution his Jewish partisan unit made in the effort to defeat the Nazi war machine. When he reflects on the years spent as a resistance fighter, he says he is still astonished to think how his small group of frightened and terrorized Jews became such a disciplined and courageous fighting force. "I'm very proud of what I did all those years," he says. "The reality was we had nothing to lose, and our way to survive was to fight."

Questions & Exercises

1. A partisan fighter in Frank's situation needed many skills. How many of these skills are stated or implied in the reading? List as many as you can. Then, list other abilities not mentioned in the reading that would be useful for a partisan.

2. Which of the abilities or skills listed in your answers to question #1 do you consider the most important ones? Why?

3. Which decisions made by Frank or his unit involved ethical considerations (questions of right and wrong)?

4. Did any of the decisions made by Frank or his unit have both practical and ethical implications? Explain.

5. If you could interview Frank Blaichman, what questions would you ask him?

6. VOCABULARY EXERCISE
Determine the meaning of the following words from their context in the reading passage. Then check the dictionary definitions. How close were your original guesses to the dictionary definitions?

Haven
Cache
Sabotage
Collaborator
Ambush

More Info on Frank



To see and hear Frank speak in his own words please click on the picture of Frank on our home page: www.jewishpartisans.org

To learn more about Frank's unit, you can read the autobiography of his commanding officer, Samuel Gruber, called *I Choose Life*, available on Amazon.com