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## PETRUSEWICZ'S ESCAPE -- THE TALL AND THE SHORT OF IT

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Kazimierz Petruszewicz (1906-1982) was a Polish araneologist who branched out after World War II to become one of the main architects and managers of the Polish school of community ecology. It is well known that he was a member of a group of Communist partisans during the war. However, one of us (CKS) was surprised to hear a remarkable story about the partisan Petruszewicz from Frank B. Golley of the University of Georgia, one which seemed to call for some investigation.

Dr. Golley heard the story from Petruszewicz's widow, who had presumably gotten it from the main character himself. In summary (and third-hand), it goes like this. Petruszewicz and others in his group were captured by the occupying German forces. As they were being herded through a forest to their execution ground, Petruszewicz noticed a peculiar spider by the side of the path. "How odd that that species should be in this part of Poland", he thought, and he stepped off the path to take a look at it. The prisoners were so lightly guarded that Petruszewicz's action was not immediately noticed, and when he saw that the guards had passed him by he made good his escape and lived

to become the major figure he later was.

Our first reaction on hearing this story was of unbounded admiration. Here was someone who was so keen on spiders that even as he was being sent to his death he had the presence of mind to take note of an unusual species. Definitely our kind of arachnologist, and we determined to tell everyone. But then we began to wonder. The story seemed too good to be true, and we thought to look into it. To judge by communications from Aleksandra Putrament and Jerzy Proszynski, our doubts were well founded.

In Dr. Putrament's recent (*Quart. Rev. Biol.* 65:435-45, 1990) moving and illuminating paper on "How I Became a Lysenkoist", Petruszewicz is repeatedly mentioned, thinly disguised as "Prof. P." Although her treatment of Prof. P seems highly unfavorable, in a recent letter Dr. Putrament says "I did not dislike Petruszewicz. Whatever [Michurinist/Lysenkoist] rubbish he preached he honestly believed."

"Petruszewicz was nice, kind, scrupulously honest and ready to save the world. He did all sorts of innocent, funny things and became the hero of numerous funny stories. Yet I have never heard about the spider and the partisans. I phoned several persons who knew him, but none of them knew the story. Moreover, it sounds very unlikely in view of [the competence of] German soldiers. ... I am afraid either Petruszewicz fabricated the story or there was a misunderstanding due to language. What I can easily believe is that he was capable of paying attention to spiders even when his life was in danger, so in principle the story fits his personality."

In another recent letter, Dr. Proszynski characterizes the escape story as related to Dr. Golley as "apocryphal and very much colored", and he likewise indicated that such carelessness by German soldiers would have been entirely out of character. However, as explained by Dr. Proszynski, Petruszewicz seems to have loosely based his account on a real incident.

"I checked with Prof. P. Trojan [now of the Institute of Zoology, Polish Academy of Sciences], who has heard the story over and over again from Petruszewicz during their 20+ years of close association. The truth was that Petruszewicz and hundreds of other Poles in Vilnius were arrested by the Germans on the

basis of proscription lists and shepherded temporarily into the railway station, which was surrounded by a concrete fence. Standing just at the fence and unsure what would happen next, the athletic Petruszewicz jumped over the fence and ran away through the surrounding bushes and forest. As he knew the area well from his spider-collecting excursions--and it is only in this respect that spiders relate to the event--he managed to escape and joined a partisan group. The other detained people were later executed."

Further, Dr. Proszynski's personal assessment of our hero seems not very different from that given by Dr. Putrament. "Petruszewicz was a colorful person, not the wisest, perhaps, but full of good intentions, who tried his best to help people and

achieved quite a lot. As a politician [after the War] promoting Lysenko's "new biology", and dealing with matters of which he understood little or nothing, he did things which now seem stupid.

But he also did much to protect people from persecution."

So there it is ... if we have got it right. But perhaps we have not got it right at all. Dr. Golley has raised several questions and given reasons for crediting the heroic version as he heard it. And the testimony we have on hand contains plenty of contradictions. Let us just say that we have reached a plausible working hypothesis of the reality of Petruszewicz's escape. It is about a tall tale, to be sure, but with an interesting short tale behind it.

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