

## **‘Jan Karski’**

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### **Abstract:**

This lecture<sup>1</sup> was presented on 29 November 2012, at the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland, Woollhara, Sydney.<sup>2</sup> The Polish Consulate General and the Australian Institute of Polish Affairs (AIPA) jointly organized a commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the publication of the Polish Government’s official Note, dated 10 December 1942, addressed to the Governments of the United Nations, alerting them to the mass extermination of Jews in German-occupied Poland. This important demarche was based on detailed first-hand, eyewitness accounts of the horrors of the Holocaust that were brought to light by Jan Karski. Before he became the emissary of the Polish Government in Exile, Karski had been selected by the Polish underground leadership in occupied Poland to go into the Warsaw ghetto and also into a camp thought to be an extermination camp, so that he could carry the underground leadership’s assessment of the extent of the emerging massacres perpetrated by the Nazis to Western leaders, with the added authenticity of a courier who had seen some of these crimes with his own eyes. Karski’s mission secretly took him twice to the Warsaw Ghetto as well as to Izbica, a transit ghetto in occupied Poland from where Jews were deported to death camps.

For Australians of my generation, the lives of World War II heroes – and Poland produced many – seem almost superhuman. How could ordinary human beings set themselves against the rampant, satanic evil that German occupation in World War II represented?

Having narrowly escaped from hell, how could they find the strength and courage to expose themselves to it again and again on a daily basis for years at a time?

And how could they do so in the face of the almost equally inhuman force of Stalinism swamping them from the east, and proving to be just as barbarous, violent and treacherous as an ostensible ally as it had been as an enemy.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this lecture appeared in *Zachor*, the journal of the Australian Association of Holocaust Survivors and Descendants. An extended version with references and explanatory notes was published as a chapter in John Besemeres’ book *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II* (ANU Press, 2016); available at <http://press.anu.edu.au/publications/difficult-neighbourhood>. This version of the lecture was first published at the AIPA Blog <https://aipa.net.au/publications/jan-karski-aipa-event-november-29-2012/>. To listen to Dr Besemeres’ lecture at the Polish Consulate in Sydney, visit <https://1drv.ms/u/s!AhXVi6DiABRTg9Uh4mrglQ4qEnLfDA?e=0FViHw>.

<sup>2</sup> The evening’s program included speeches by Marek Burdajewicz (AIPA Vice President) and Daniel Gromann (Polish Consul General), the lecture by Dr John Besemeres (ANU Centre for European Studies), short film documentaries and interviews with Jan Karski, and musical interludes by Wojciech Wiśniewski. A reception followed. The occasion was attended by an audience of around 130 people and judged a huge success by all.

Many people succumbed to the crushing pressures of the German-Soviet war in Europe by jettisoning their moral values and doing terrible things that in a half-way normal life most would never have done. Others responded with bleak resignation. Others again nurtured illusions which made their situation seem less desperate.

Few had many options. Some had no options whatsoever. And some, many, succeeded in rising astonishingly to the occasion. Jan Karski was one such.

Jan Karski (Koziński) was born in 1914 and brought up in a strongly Catholic family in Lodz. His mother and much admired older brother, were also devoted followers of the agnostic Marshal Pilsudski. They lived in a Lodz neighbourhood where there were many Jews with whom the young Karski had friendly relations.

After successfully graduating in law and diplomacy at Lwow university, further study in a military academy, then a couple of years as a cadet diplomat attached to Polish missions in Geneva and London, Karski began working in the Polish foreign ministry just before war broke out. At the military academy and in his Foreign Affairs training Karski had graduated top of the class. He seemed destined for a brilliant and conventional diplomatic career.

At first glance, the bare facts of Karski's wartime experiences seem drawn from an overwritten adventure thriller. Deploying as a young lieutenant with his mounted artillery unit near what was to become known to the world as Auschwitz in south-western Poland, he and his comrades were overwhelmed by the initial German onslaught.

Retreating in confusion towards Lwow in the southeast, Karski and many of his comrades were taken prisoner by invading Soviet forces bent on gathering the fruits of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's secret division of spoils.

Showing characteristic resourcefulness under pressure, Karski tricked his captors into believing he was not an officer and had himself included in a Soviet-German prisoner exchange. Though he didn't of course realize it at the time, he thereby escaped being murdered by a bullet in the head in an NKVD cellar.

Escaping from a German cattle truck by persuading his fellow prisoners to throw him through a small window at about eye level while the train was moving, he set off on foot through a wintry and devastated Poland for Warsaw. After an eventful journey he arrived in the capital where with his older brother's help he soon joined the nascent underground movement.

In January 1940, he was sent by a dangerous and oblique route through Slovakia and Hungary to Angers in France where the emergent Polish government in exile was located during the *drole de guerre*.

There he had many adventures but mainly of a political kind, maintaining cordial relations with different feuding Polish factions, enduring a grilling from Interior Minister Stanislaw Kot, and a dressing down from Prime Minister General Sikorski, who viewed him as a Pilsudski follower. It

was not the last dressing-down he would receive from the general, though Sikorski came to deeply respect his skills and devotion to the cause.

After returning to Poland for a month in mid-1940, where he learned that his beloved older brother had been seized by the Gestapo, he was dispatched on another liaison journey to France with much sensitive information in his head and an incriminating microfilm on his person. Betrayed by a Slovak facilitator, he was arrested by the Gestapo and brutally and repeatedly tortured.

Fearing that he might eventually betray underground secrets, he attempted suicide by hacking his wrists with a razor blade he had hidden in his boot before leaving Warsaw. Dismayed that they may lose valuable intelligence, the Germans dispatched him to a prison hospital back across the border in occupied Poland to recuperate.

Here Karski became aware that some of the staff were underground conspirators. He begged them either to arrange his escape or get him cyanide so that he could kill himself quickly and efficiently when his torture and interrogation resumed.

An underground unit headed by Jozef Cyrankiewicz, then a PPS socialist, later to be a prime minister of communist Poland, organized a remarkable Boys Own Annual escape from the prison facility.

Later the Germans shot over thirty people for their presumed involvement in the plot to rescue the high-value prisoner. This typical German retribution left Karski feeling bitter anguish for having 'caused' these deaths for the rest of his life.

Returning to Warsaw, he was deployed for a while in less torrid resistance activities with the underground state's Bureau of Information and Propaganda where, among other things, he prepared and disseminated subversive literature aimed at German soldiers. Another aspect of the BIP's work was liaison with Polish Jews.

During this period, together with his BIP boss, Karski saved a Jewish couple, relocating them from Warsaw and protecting them from a Polish szmalcownik who accosted them at a Warsaw railway station. Sadly, at the country estate to which Karski had escorted them, where a wealthy sympathizer maintained a kind of safe house for the underground, they were later to be betrayed by a peasant who worked on the estate.

In late 1942, Karski was chosen by the Delegate, Cyryl Ratajski to undertake a high-level liaison visit to the government-in-exile in London. The main priorities set for his mission included carrying messages from the underground to government and vice versa, and stressing to the allies that Poland stood ready to co-operate as far as possible with pro-Soviet forces in the Polish resistance, but also that doing so was proving difficult.

Since Hitler had invaded the Soviet Union, the allies were starting to press the Poles to be nice to Moscow despite its having occupied much of Poland, murdered many of its people and deported some 1.7 million in lethally inhuman conditions to Siberia and Central Asia.

Karski again had to deal with Polish factional politics for whose excesses he had little sympathy, though he had a great ability to keep them all sweet. But one thing the factions did agreed on was the need to try to explain to all in London that the communist groups in Poland were not acting as allies of the underground movement but rather as Moscow's disruptive proxies.

He was also commissioned to convey to all in London the extent of the monstrous German crimes against the Jews. Karski's lifelong sympathy for Jewish people made him a natural advocate for their desperate cause.

He had met the Bundist leader Leon Fajner and a senior Zionist and listened at length to their briefings, fears and desperate proposals for international action. With Fajner, Karski made two covert entries into the Warsaw ghetto, where he was deeply affected by the doubtless routine horrors he witnessed, including a repulsive "Judenjagd" by Hitlerjugend adolescents armed with rifles.

With the help of the Jewish underground, he also undertook a visit to what he believed to be the Belzec death camp, where again he witnessed such sickening scenes of demonic cruelty that he was overcome and began to suffer a nervous collapse. Fearing that he might betray himself and his helpers, the guide who was accompanying him hustled him out unnoticed.

After an eventful journey via Germany, France (now occupied), Spain and Gibraltar and a period in British detention, Karski finally commenced his London mission in November 1942. From here on his war adventures were to be political and bureaucratic at a high level, and he would not be allowed to return to Poland.

In London, he had meetings with premier General Sikorski and President Raczkiewicz, and with senior British officials and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Karski sought an audience with Churchill, but felt he botched his pitch on that score to Eden, who denied him the opportunity.

He also met Polish Jewish leaders and a great many British celebrities. With his photographic memory, graphic eye-witness observations linguistic facility, and his gaunt frame and face ravaged by Gestapo torture, he again made a memorable impression on virtually everyone he saw.

President Raczkiewicz, following Karski's suggestion, wrote a letter to Pope Pius XII, pleading with him to publicly denounce the Germans' crimes against the Jews. Sikorski's government decided that a report on the German mass murder program against the Jews based in part on Karski's testimony and smuggled microfilmed materials should be urgently presented to the allies. This was done by Foreign Minister Raczynski on December 10th 1942.

On December 17th, 1942, at British initiative, the allies did issue a declaration condemning the Germans' murder of the Jews, though only after some reservations and amendments were incorporated from the US State Department.

On January 18th 1943, Raczynski presented further demands to the Allied Council, calling on them to bomb Germany in reprisal for the continuing mass murder of the Jews, to press Berlin to release Jews from occupied countries, and to press allies and neutral countries in turn to accept them. Nothing much of substance, however, ensued as a result.

On the face of it, the part of Karski's mission devoted to the holocaust seemed to have gone reasonably well. But the appeals he brought from the Jews of Poland for resolute action against German murder camps had changed little in the allies' war strategies.

Karski's allied interlocutors seemed reluctant to make saving the Jews who were still alive a major priority. And they saw nothing but downsides in drastic responses. In their view the best the hard-pressed allies could do (victory still seemed a remote and uncertain prospect) was to prosecute their war aims against the Axis forces with all their strength.

In this dispiriting response there seemed to be an element of residual skepticism as to whether things were as bad as Jewish and Polish lobbyists were saying, and a failure of imagination and empathy, even a certain pusillanimity in the face of such a dire and unprecedented human emergency. They apparently did not see it as something going to the heart of their perceived national interests.

There had been in fact a strange reluctance away from the European killing fields to recognize the enormity of what was happening. Innumerable reports from survivors and other witnesses had been filtering into the public domain. They were necessarily incomplete individually, but taken together, they added up to a fairly clear picture.

For different reasons, many Jews outside the war-zone were also for long reluctant to accept the dire reports and warnings that were accumulating. Many hoped so desperately that they could not be true, that they convinced themselves that they were not true; or at least that in the country or region of greatest direct concern to them, things would somehow not be so bad.

In 1943, the government in exile arranged for Karski to travel to the United States to take his message there. The line-up of dignitaries he managed to speak to was even more impressive than in London, including Secretary of State Cordell Hull and President Roosevelt himself, together with numerous senior civilian and military officials.

He also met leading American Jews, notably Rabbi Stephen Wise, founder of the World Jewish Congress, and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who was a confidant and adviser to Roosevelt.

By this time, the Polish government's main concerns were the looming threat of a return of the Soviets with plans to re-annex much of Poland's territory, and even to sponsor its own Polish

government. The Katyn issue, which had been troubling the government for a long time had bubbled to the surface.

Once the Germans had discovered some of the mass graves and publicly invited the Red Cross to send a delegation to investigate the site, the London Poles could no longer accept allied recommendations that they not 'provoke' the Russians by making public statements on the issue.

When they announced that they would support a German offer to allow a Red Cross team to investigate the site, Stalin denounced the government in exile and broke off relations with it. The allies blamed the Poles for this, and of course continued to pretend to be agnostic about the true authors of the Katyn crimes for decades afterwards.

In Washington, Karski's eloquence produced its usual animated response, and Roosevelt spoke with him for over an hour, though some of his comments and questions suggested that the desired message was not getting through fully.

But on the two main issues for Karski – opposing Soviet plans for Poland and responding more forcefully to the holocaust, while Roosevelt listened attentively, he gave no sign that he was inclined to reconsider his position. Karski placed special emphasis on the Jews' terrible plight, but seems not to have mentioned his own direct observations in the ghetto and at the camp.

In a conversation a few weeks earlier with Justice Frankfurter after a dinner meeting during which Frankfurter had seemed faintly sceptical, Karski described to him in detail his own experiences in the Warsaw ghetto and at the camp near Belzec. Frankfurter listened carefully, and seemed to be very struck by the gruesome detail of Karski's eye-witness description.

But after pacing up and down silently for a time, he resumed his seat, turned to Karski and said: "Mr Karski, a man like me talking to a man like you must be completely frank. So I must say: I am unable to believe you."

The Polish ambassador to Washington who was hosting the dinner protested that Karski was an absolutely truthful and trustworthy witness, to which Frankfurter responded: "Mr Ambassador, I did not say this young man is lying. I said that I cannot believe him. There is a difference."

Frankfurter's reaction reminds me of the wonderful Czechoslovakian film of the 1960s *The Shop on the High Street* about wartime Slovakia's Aryanisation program. A Slovak man is directed to take over an old deaf Jewish widow's sewing shop. He wants to protect her and pretends to be a relative. When moves are imminent to deport all the Jews to a camp, he tries to explain to her why he must hide her.

Mrs Lautmann, beautifully played by the great Jewish actress – the great Polish actress – Ida Kamińska, listens to his explanations with non-comprehension at first, but finally thinks she has understood. A look of horror passes across her face and she says one word: 'pogrom!'. I still remember the sharp intake of breath in the cinema as she said it. The total and poignant

inadequacy of that already terrible word to describe what was about to overwhelm her and her town sums up much of what we are talking about this evening.

So Karski's mission to the US, while it produced quite a stir, ended from his own point of view in failure on the two central issues: Soviet perfidy and the German destruction of European Jewry. But if it was indeed a failure, it was a failure in the best Polish tradition of valiant failures.

He remained in the US and for a time became a celebrity on the lecture circuit, publishing his book on the Polish underground "Story of a Secret State" (Tajne Państwo) in 1944, well before the war ended, so that he had to self-censor extensively. The book was a best-seller, but when fame abated and the situation in Poland after the war went from bad to worse, Karski decided to settle in the US permanently.

He completed a doctorate and became a lecturer at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Washington, after an attempt to find work in the State Department failed. Karski had of course in his pre-war days been an aspiring diplomat. While he became a popular and successful lecturer, and a patriot of his adopted country, the anguish of his wartime experiences and his failure to relieve the terrible suffering he had witnessed, never left him.

After decades of silence on these subjects, Karski was drawn again, unwillingly, into public discussion of the holocaust by Claude Lanzmann, the maker of the celebrated documentary Shoah. Lanzmann had assured Karski he would give due emphasis to efforts by Poles to help Jews, as well as their failures and betrayals and also to Karski's own efforts to alert the world. But in fact, Karski's visits to the Warsaw ghetto and the camp figured prominently, and the rest scarcely at all.

In 1981, Elie Wiesel also 'discovered' Karski when organizing a conference on the holocaust, and managed to persuade him to speak in public about his wartime experiences. This led to a more general public discovery of him, and a new fame which, though it revived painful memories, must also have brought him some healing and satisfaction.

It also led to some intra-Polish controversy, as his role and views on things became better known. His association with the film 'Shoah', for example, which appeared in 1985, earned him hostile reactions from some Poles, who felt the film depicted Poles and Poland in an exclusively and tendentiously negative light. That was not Karski's doing of course, but viewers were not necessarily to know that.

His left-wing views also evoked suspicion. He had been inclined to support Mikołajczyk's doomed efforts to reach some degree of accommodation with Moscow. In the underground his sympathies were naturally with the left and against the anti-Semitic right, though as an emissary he did his best to maintain harmonious contact with all.

And he had been very close in the underground to Cyrankiewicz, who later led the rump PPS party into alliance with the communists to form the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party). Some

Poles were unpleasantly struck that despite obvious differences of view between them, in a 1970s visit to Poland for research purposes, Karski had a warm and emotional reunion with Cyrankiewicz, by then discredited and out of power. But the meeting was perhaps unsurprising given that Cyrankiewicz's group had saved his life.

Karski was a man of broad and undogmatic sympathies. Because of their history, Poles have tended to be very hostile to their neighbours to east and west, not without good reason. Any Pole who seems inclined to parley with them has often been quickly identified as a traitor. Shades of grey have not been Poland's strength. But while Karski had great moral clarity about the most important issues confronting his country, he was, for a Pole, unusually flexible.

In his later years, Karski became a friend and mentor to the new generation of post-communist Polish diplomats arriving in Washington. He struck them as being a classic representative of the traditional *poszlachecka inteligencja*: a gentleman diplomat, with a stylish home and manners and egalitarian sympathies.

His advice to them was explicitly unheroic and at times earthy: above all, be realists, avoid Polonocentrism; don't expect to be rewarded for your noble actions; no-one will write you a cheque for Solidarity; get into NATO, but remember that once you're there, that's just the beginning.

His slightly sardonic three golden rules for young diplomats were:

have a pee before you go to a meeting or reception  
if there's a vacant spot there take it (i.e. don't let opportunities pass you by)  
from time to time travel by bus (keep your feet on the ground and don't get seduced by the cocktail circuit)

At Wiesel's conference, Karski struck a loftier note:

'The Lord assigned me a role to speak and write during the war, when – as it seemed to me – it might help. It did not...

Furthermore when the war came to an end I learned that the governments, the leaders, the scholars, the writers did not know what had been happening to the Jews... The murder of six million innocents was a secret...

I am a practising Catholic. Although I am not a heretic, still my faith tells me the second Original Sin has been committed: through commission or omission, or self-imposed ignorance, or insensitivity, or self-interest, or hypocrisy, or heartless rationalization.

This sin will haunt humanity to the end of time.  
It does haunt me. And I want it to be so.