

The Lesson of Jan Karski for Our World

Heritage of Jan Karski, whose harrowing reports on what Germans were doing in Auschwitz were ignored by the world, is now a moral call to action in defence of human rights.

I attended Georgetown University from 2005-2009 where Professor Karski had previously taught for five decades. And yet I didn't know anything about him until years after I graduated. In fact, I walked by his statue for four years and never bothered to notice that elegant, haunted figure sitting on a bench beside a chessboard. In 2014, Derek Goldman, my former professor and longtime collaborator, asked me to help him write a play to commemorate Karski's centennial to be performed at Georgetown (Karski died in 2000). We then watched his devastating testimony in Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* where he spoke about his wartime experiences for the first time in 35 years, and we read Karski's memoir *Story of a Secret State*, as well as E. Thomas Wood's excellent biography *Karski: How One Man Tried To Stop The Holocaust*. We quickly began to unpack the many failures Karski had internalized and represented, and we tried to adapt his powerful story of moral courage into a solo performance that we hope resonates today. Our book is an extension of that mission.

Jan Karski was a courier for the Polish Underground. His job was to collect information in Nazi-occupied Poland and carry messages from the Underground to the Polish government-in-exile in France, and, later, England. His skillset was ideal for such a job. He had a photographic memory, spoke many languages, and had a remarkable ability to survive. Karski's trips through occupied Europe were extremely dangerous. He was once captured and tortured by the Gestapo—the Polish Underground harrowingly helped him escape. The Underground was built to resist occupation, fight for Poland, and keep the Polish government-in-exile informed of all matters on the ground. In my experience studying Karski, I have learned how important joining the Underground was for him. It gave him purpose and hope—and it gave him a Poland he thought was defeated after the Blitzkrieg. Many Underground members gave their life to keep Karski alive. The sophistication of the Underground's military, intelligence and social operations were astonishing to me, as was the sheer size of the resistance state despite the dangers of being involved. It is this resourcefulness, courage, and spirit that is also a window into Karski.

In 1942, Jewish leaders learned of his mission to England where he would report to many influential leaders about conditions in occupied Poland. They begged him to bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust and report to leaders abroad that time was running out, that the Jewish people were being exterminated. He agreed. This was not a job given to him by the Polish Underground, but he took it on just the same. Disguised, he walked through the Warsaw Ghetto and, then, a transit camp in Izbica Lubelska where he witnessed dehumanization, devastation, and death. He would go on to report to leaders such as US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, US Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden about what he saw.

Some scholars argue that Karski's meeting with President Roosevelt in 1943, in part, caused the President to form the War Refugee Board in 1944, which helped save thousands of lives. Others (myself included) believe that Roosevelt's action came far too late—more lives should have been saved. Roosevelt never asked "one single specific question about the Jewish problem," as Karski said, when he met with him. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden would not allow Karski to report to Prime Minister Churchill. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter said he did not believe Karski, that he could not comprehend how humanity would be capable of such a crime.

Karski's memoir, *Story of a Secret State*, became a bestseller in 1944, and yet it did not seem to change public sentiment. Because of all this, Karski considered his mission to be a failure. That sense of failure is one of the many important lessons Jan Karski teaches us. Anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial still live with all of us today—the reaction of leaders and the public to Karski's eyewitness accounts are examples of how the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity are allowed to occur. In 1981, Karski delivered a powerful speech at the International Liberators Conference in which he said, "The Jews were left alone to perish." I believe he is saying that leaders and whole nation-states were complicit in the horrors of the Holocaust by not acknowledging, not caring, and not acting. Karski's legacy is a challenge to the conscience and a moral call to action. He teaches us "that the common humanity of people, not the power of governments, is the only real protector of human rights."

Clark Young

The text is simultaneously published in the Polish monthly "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of a project carried out with the Institute of National Remembrance.