

MY REPORT *to the* WORLD

**STORY  
OF A  
SECRET  
STATE**

FOREWORD BY MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

**JAN KARSKI**



Map by Chris McGowan

# MORE PRAISE FOR JAN KARSKI AND *STORY OF A SECRET STATE*

“We must tell our children about how this evil was allowed to happen—because so many people succumbed to their darkest instincts; because so many others stood silent. But let us also tell our children about the Righteous among the Nations. Among them was Jan Karski—a young Polish Catholic—who witnessed Jews being put on cattle cars, who saw the killings, and who told the truth, all the way to President Roosevelt himself.”

—**President Barack Obama**, announcing Jan Karski’s posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom

“I believe that great heroes like Jan Karski never really die. Jan Karski will live on in books, in his students, in the memory of his larger-than-life deeds.”

—**President of Poland Lech Wałęsa**

“Jan Karski is well known as the ‘courier from Poland who exposed the Holocaust,’ but his work in the service of the underground Polish state, which flourished under the noses of the Nazis, equally deserves to find the limelight. Unlike its counterparts in other countries, the Polish Resistance Movement did not confine itself to military activities; it created a huge network of clandestine organizations that functioned in the fields of culture, education, propaganda, justice, and economics, and that undermined the social control of the German forces of occupation. Karski’s book on this subject is a classic, providing an unmatched account of the wartime realities in a country that lay at the epicenter of the conflict.”

—**Norman Davies**, St. Antony’s College, Oxford; Jagiellonian University, Krakow

“The notion that one person can make a difference is personified by Jan Karski, who I was privileged to have as my professor—and guiding light—at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. Karski’s *Story of a Secret State* offers a glimpse into a time and place ruled by Nazi terror: Poland in the early 1940s. Karski risked his life to bear witness to Nazi atrocities against Jews, Catholics, and Polish dissidents. In disguise, he snuck into the Warsaw Ghetto and a Nazi transfer camp, then reported his terrifying observations directly to British leaders and President Franklin Roosevelt, among the first reports of the Holocaust to the civilized world. Georgetown’s edition of *Story of a Secret State* gives a new generation of readers the portrait of a genuine hero who truly made a difference.”

—**Pat Quinn**, Governor of Illinois; Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, 1971

“Jan Karski’s brave account of the Nazi’s horrific crimes and one man’s heroic resistance strikes our collective conscience as strongly today as when he first published it over six decades ago. Today, millions around the world continue to thank and honor him for exposing the evil that was perpetuated throughout concentration camps. When President Barack Obama posthumously awarded Jan Karski the Medal of Freedom, he recognized that Karski’s story is one of courage as much as compassion. This book is a stirring reminder that our world depends on both.”

—**Rahm Emanuel**, Mayor, City of Chicago

“Briskly paced, this is a gripping and immediate account of Nazi brutality from a brave leader of the

resistance.”

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—**Publishers Weekly** (★ Starred review)

“A disturbing, unique, invaluable record of Poland’s suffering and heroism during World War II.”

—**Kirkus Reviews** (★ Starred review)

“His wartime saga as officer, as Soviet prisoner, as escapee, in the hands of the Gestapo, and as a Polish Underground activist and courier, is beyond remarkable. In a world today where words such as ‘courage’ and ‘heroism’ have been so overused—applied freely from sports to entertainment to politics as to be rendered practically meaningless—Jan Karski was the rare human being who embodied both.”

—**David Harris**, *Huffington Post*

“Stands in the absolute first rank of books about the resistance in World War II. If you wish to read about a man more courageous and honorable than Jan Karski, I would have no idea who to recommend.”

—**Alan Furst**, author of *The Polish Officer*

“Jan Karski: a brave man? Better: a just man.”

—**Elie Wiesel**

“Professor Karski was a man of uncommon courage, integrity, intelligence, and love. May his great soul rest in peace.”

—**William E. Lori**, Archbishop of Baltimore

“*Story of a Secret State* is a classic of Holocaust literature, an extraordinary testament to man’s inhumanity to man, and the even more remarkable courage required to resist it.”

—**Ben MacIntyre**, author of *Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies*

“To have utterly vital information but to be ignored or disbelieved must be almost as terrible as to be interrogated for information one doesn’t possess. For that was the fate of Jan Karski, hero of the Polish Underground resistance, whose Second World War memoir this is. It might read like the screenplay for an incredibly exciting war movie, but it is all true.”

—**Andrew Roberts**, historian and author of *The Storm of War*

“Karski’s account of his missions is an electrifying tale of false identities, near captures, spies and secret film capsules.... In military terms, Karski’s mission was a failure and the Allies did not change their strategy to stop the Holocaust. Yet, in human terms, Karski’s account is invaluable. ‘I would like nothing better than to purge my mind of these memories,’ he wrote in 1944, but he carried them to his grave.”

—**Frank Trentmann**, *Sunday Express* (London)

“His is not a story of conventional heroism. It is a morally grave resistance in which any attack or escape is likely to cause the deaths of comrades or civilians.... Karski provides an astonishing insight into the operation of the secret Polish state.... His story deserves not just revival but reflection.... Karski’s electrifying words still speak only too eloquently for themselves.”

—**Marek Kohn**, *Independent* (London)

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“Jan Karski’s life story was quite literally incredible. He was the man who first brought news of the Holocaust to the disbelieving ears of the Allies while the Second World War was still raging ... [his book] is a cracking good read: Karski’s adventures are worthy of the wildest spy thriller.”

—**Nigel Jones**, *The Sunday Telegraph* (London)

“*Story of a Secret State* is a Boy’s Own tale of disguise, hidden microfilms, and the obligatory cyanide pill. In one escape Karski leaps from a moving prison train; in another he swaps uniforms with a fellow inmate; in a third he is sprung from the Gestapo’s clutches by Underground fighters whose orders were to save him or to kill him.... This eyewitness testimony from a war that was still raging while Karski was writing is imbued with a passion that subsequent memoirs can rarely match. The stench of war clings to its pages.”

—**Stefan Wagstyl**, *Financial Times* (London)

“Karski’s exploration of the moral fog in which he and his colleagues operated resembles scenes tantalizingly directed by Hitchcock.... Karski’s account of the systematic brutality of the Nazi regime is literally chilling.”

—**Peter Conrad**, *Observer* (London)

# STORY OF A SECRET STATE

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# STORY OF A SECRET STATE

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**My Report to the World**

**JAN KARSKI**

Foreword by Madeleine Albright

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# Contents

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*Note on the Text*

*Publisher's Note*

*Preface*

*Foreword*

*Biographical Essay of Jan Karski*

- 1 Defeat
- 2 Prisoner in Russia
- 3 Exchange and Escape
- 4 Devastated Poland
- 5 The Beginning
- 6 Transformation
- 7 Initiation
- 8 Borecki
- 9 Contact between Cells
- 10 Mission to France
- 11 The Underground State
- 12 Caught by the Gestapo
- 13 Torture
- 14 The SS Hospital
- 15 Rescue
- 16 The "Gardener"
- 17 Propaganda from the Country
- 18 Execution of a Traitor
- 19 The Four Branches of the Underground
- 20 The Laskowa Apartment
- 21 Assignment in Lublin
- 22 Retribution
- 23 The Secret Press
- 24 My "Conspiratorial Apparatus"
- 25 The Liaison Women

26 Marriage per Procuram

---

27 School—Underground

28 Parliament in Poland

29 The Ghetto

30 “To Die in Agony ...”

31 Unter den Linden Revisited

32 Journey through France and Spain

33 My Report to the World

*Notes*

*Glossary*

*Further Reading*

*Afterword*

*Index*

Illustrations

## Note on the Text

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The present volume follows the text of the original 1944 US edition of *Story of a Secret State*, supplemented with translations of additional material provided by the author in 1999 for the Polish edition. In the introduction to the 1999 edition, Jan Karski explained these additions: “When I wrote this book in 1944, I faithfully and honestly reported what I remembered. But certain circumstances at that time imposed limits on what could be published.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Publisher's Note**

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The publisher would like to thank the following individuals for their gracious help with the publication of this edition of the book: Madeleine Albright, Robert Billingsley, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Giordano Chiaruttini, John P. Forgas, Barbara Kalabinski, Matthew Lambert, Bart Moore, Anthony Paduano, Andrzej Rojek, Timothy Snyder, and in particular, Wanda Urbanska. In addition, the publisher would like to thank Barbara Kalabinski and Piotr Wróbel for their editorial counsel, for editing the notes, and for writing the glossary. We also acknowledge Barbara Kalabinski for her expertise and care in creating the index.

# Preface

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I do not pretend to have given an exhaustive picture of the Polish Underground, its organization and its activities.<sup>1</sup> Because of our methods, I believe there is no one today who could give an all-embracing recital. This would be possible only some years after the war with the aid of information yet to be gathered and checked. This book is a purely personal story, my story. I have tried to recall everything I experienced, to tell all about my own activities and to recount the deeds of all those with whom I had actual contact.

Poland's Underground state, to which I belonged, was under the authority of the Polish government in London. I know that, besides this organization, there were other elements carrying on their activities under the direction or the influence of Moscow. Because of my sincere intention to describe only my personal experiences, their activities could not properly be included in this book.

Being the first active member of the Polish Underground in the fortunate position to publish some aspects of its story, I hope that it will encourage others to relate their experiences and that out of such narratives the free peoples all over the world will be able to form an objective opinion as to how the Polish people reacted during the years of German conquest.

J. K., 194

# Foreword

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In the summer of 1942, in occupied Poland, a high-level meeting of resistance leaders gathered to write a report to the outside world, presenting a true account of Nazi persecution and also an appeal for help. Although the officials argued about what to say, they had no doubt whom to entrust with the job of carrying their report through enemy lines. When the meeting adjourned, they sent a clandestine radio transmission to London and Paris:

Karski coming soon. Goes through Germany, Belgium, France, Spain. Inform all “transfer cells” and Allied representatives.  
Password: “Coming to see Aunt Sophie.”

Jan Karski’s historic visit to “Aunt Sophie” provides the climax to this remarkable wartime memoir, composed when the battle for Europe and the accompanying Holocaust were still under way. Published in 1944, the book was an immediate bestseller.

*Story of a Secret State* begins with a nocturnal rapping on Karski’s apartment door and an urgent summons to military duty. Poland’s army was mobilizing against a threat from Germany, one of several neighbors with which the nation had repeatedly clashed during its thousand-year history. In 1795, Poland was split into three parts and erased from the map until 1918, when the First World War ended in defeat for the country’s traditional enemies. During the next two decades, the revived Polish Republic labored to establish itself amid economic turbulence, political infighting, and the rise of ruthless and predatory dictators to its east and west. In August 1939, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin agreed on a secret plan to invade Poland from both sides and share the spoils.

Even as tensions heightened, the Polish army was filled with bravado. The country’s military officers, including Lieutenant Jan Karski, doubted that Hitler would be so foolish as to attack and were certain that, if he did, they would defeat him. But they were wrong. Their antiquated armed forces proved no match for German tanks and aircraft. After a desperate retreat to the east, Karski and the surviving members of his unit were intercepted and detained by the oncoming Soviet military; the young officer was among those turned over to the Nazis, who locked him in a prison labor camp.

Convinced that the Polish army had somehow survived and that its soldiers were still fighting, Karski saw it as his duty to join them. Seizing the opportunity of a prisoner transport, he helped to organize a daring escape during which inmates propelled their comrades—including Karski—through the open windows of a moving train. He then made his way by foot to Warsaw, where he joined the fledgling Polish Underground, a network of spies, saboteurs, and propagandists that grew rapidly, despite German repression. Perhaps more than any other Nazi-occupied people, the Poles rejected collaboration. They lacked the power to liberate themselves, but they acted in tandem with the Polish government-in-exile (based first in Paris then London), and stoutly rebuffed enemy efforts to destroy the nation’s identity, language, and culture.

Jan Karski was 25 when the war broke out. He was a well-educated, popular man, fond of food, pretty women, and fast horses. Until the night of his summons to duty, he had enjoyed an agreeable life and career, serving in diplomatic positions in Germany, Switzerland, and Great Britain. He had every reason to look to the future with confidence. Then, in a matter of days, he was plunged, along with his countrymen, into a life-and-death struggle against a savage foe. Karski, who found the gratuitous cruelty of the Nazis beyond his comprehension, resolved to fight against it with his every breath.

For the Polish Underground to operate effectively, its members had to communicate with one

another. That meant devising ways to avoid detection while insulating the network from exposure in the event of arrests, which were inevitable. Karski, with his steady nerves, skill with languages, and near-photographic memory, quickly established himself as the organization's principal international courier. In that role he employed all the accessories of espionage: codenames, forged documents, falsified personal histories, disguises, clandestine signals, and secret intermediaries. To the modern reader the items on this list might imply a certain glamor, but as Karski observes:

The kind of work we engaged in had to be done by the simplest, most prosaic methods. Mystery and excitement attract attention and perhaps the greatest law of Underground work is: "Be inconspicuous." The quality we valued more highly than any other was the ability ... to "melt into the landscape," to seem humdrum and ordinary.

The Underground's ability to sustain itself depended on preserving the physical and mental health of its members—no easy task. Karski and his fellow conspirators existed on meager wartime rations at a time when bread flour was frequently mixed with sawdust, coffee was made from grain, butter and fresh vegetables were only memories, and no consumer product was more precious than lice medicine. But the scarcity of food and the abundance of vermin were less dangerous to the Polish resistance than despair. To Karski, the sight of his beloved country in chains was intensely painful, as was the misery of friends who had lost loved ones, homes, jobs, financial resources, and hope. The Polish Underground was a stirring example of human resilience, but it provided no guarantee against personal desolation. Karski witnessed the self-inflicted death of a Polish officer, a young soldier paralyzed by fear, a Jewish leader who could not live with the knowledge of what was happening to his people, and a widow—Karski's own sister—who turned away from him when sorrow engulfed her heart. Even he, with his great reserves of determination, was driven at one point to attempt suicide.

As a courier, Karski was often on the move either within Poland or between his homeland and the Allied headquarters in France. These expeditions demanded from him a quick wit, enormous discipline, and physical stamina. He often had to bide his time for days, exposed to the elements, or hide in uncomfortable places with little food or space for exercise. An independent person, he nevertheless had to rely on the frontier guides who spent the war shepherding spies, escaped prisoners, soldiers, Jews, and other refugees out of the shadow of the Third Reich. The travelers employed every mode of transportation from foot power and bicycles to trucks, boats, trains, and skis. These journeys might consume a few hours or a few weeks but, as soon as one group reached its destination, another took its place in line. The guides were tough, loyal men and women whose judgment was tested each day and whose lives were constantly at risk. If a guide made a mistake or was betrayed, those with him would almost surely be captured. That is what happened to Jan Karski during one of his trips between Poland and France. Seized by the Gestapo, he was interrogated and had his teeth punched out, ribs broken, and hands lacerated before being knocked unconscious and then beaten again. The story of his rescue is one of the more gripping chapters in this extraordinary book.

The resistance movement could not tolerate traitors and was placed in jeopardy whenever one of its members was arrested. That is why Underground operatives were equipped with cyanide capsules and why suspected collaborators were routinely killed without due process or trial. This was a world where people were often not what they seemed and where faulty assumptions could easily prove fatal. Even patriots might betray friends to save their own lives and families. Consider what it must have been like to live in a society where harsh punishments were doled out whether one obeyed the authorities or not. The Nazis demanded submission, the Underground mandated resistance. The residents of occupied Poland lived under two wholly incompatible systems of justice and law.

The desperation of these times was reflected in an ongoing test of wills. The Nazis responded brutally to every sign of Polish defiance. When they could not identify the perpetrator of an insult or

attack, they simply rounded up a random group of Poles to be killed or jailed. Underground leaders knew that each operation on their part would make the repression more brutal, yet they refused to be deterred. The Nazis promised that life would be easier if the Poles accepted defeat, but to that brave people, nothing could be worse than giving up.

The Poles were fighting both to defeat the Nazis and to preserve their right to an independent state. This required that they maintain a resistance force but also a government that could claim to speak for exiles and internal dissidents alike. Part of Karski's job as a courier was to maintain communications between the exiled leaders in Paris and the various political factions in Poland. His success in that role went beyond his ability to smuggle documents on microfilm; he was valued even more for his personal observations and for his integrity. When he arrived at his destinations, he conveyed the atmosphere and mood behind written words and added his own reporting. This was welcomed because the Poles under Nazi occupation were eager for every scrap of news from the outside, and those in exile were full of questions about events back home. In addition to carrying messages from the Underground's top leadership, Karski brought reports—which he memorized—from each political party in Poland to the corresponding party representatives in Paris. This meant that he was trusted by all Poles to protect their secrets from the Nazis, and by each party to protect its secrets from other Poles. Karski considered this responsibility to be what it was: a sacred promise that he would never betray.

In describing his wartime experiences, Karski does not fail to admit his own shortcomings, which included impatience, a touch of arrogance, and a tendency to lash out when others chastised him—whether the criticism was justified or not. He emerges from these pages as an intelligent and dedicated man of action who saw his duty, performed it, and was generous in judging others. As he points out, he did not have a spouse or children to whom he was responsible, which made it easier for him to dedicate himself fully to his country's cause.

*Story of a Secret State* concerns itself with the fate of nations but derives its color and readability from a cast of memorable individuals whom Karski describes with a discerning eye and an artist's touch. As the narrative unfolds, one of Karski's more introverted friends—a violinist known for his timidity—blossoms into a fierce Underground warrior. A smooth-talking SS officer tries to charm Karski into becoming a collaborator only to erupt, when rebuffed, in a fit of righteous fury. A teenage boy, considered an aimless troublemaker, grows up quickly under the discipline of resistance activities. A country girl of diminutive size and winsome looks plots the execution of a burly traitor; and a young woman whose job is to deliver Underground newspapers to dozens of locations a day nurtures the fantasy of becoming the matron in a ladies' restroom so that she might never have to move again.

Considering the era in which he wrote, certain of Karski's observations are particularly endearing, at least to me:

Despite the worldwide opinion that women are loquacious and indiscreet, my own experience has led me to believe that women on the whole make better conspiratorial workers than men.... They are quicker to perceive danger ... superior at being inconspicuous and generally display much caution, discretion and common sense.... Men are often prone to exaggeration and bluff and ... subconsciously inclined to surround themselves with an air of mystery that sooner or later proves fatal.

Karski's memoir has in common with other tales of wartime resistance an abundance of drama, human passion, and narrow escapes. What sets it apart is the author's commitment to a principle larger than the yearnings of any one individual or nation—and that is a commitment to truth. This trait was most evident when, in mid-1942, he was given the job of delivering a comprehensive report to the West using the password phrase "Coming to see Aunt Sophie."



By this time, Karski had already escaped from enemy hands on two occasions and been beaten and tortured in the process. He was a Polish patriot whose only sworn mission was the preservation and liberation of his country. Virtually all of continental Europe, including the former safe haven of France, was now controlled by the Nazis. The odds of his successfully carrying a message from his starting point in Warsaw to London were slim. With this daunting task before him, Karski could have been expected to quietly gird himself for the responsibility and do nothing that might add to it. Yet the courier's mind was uneasy. He was the one who had been chosen to bear witness. This meant that, before departing, he must see all there was to see.

And so, in those hot summer days, Karski educated himself about the population many others wished to forget. Guided by friends, he entered and exited the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, a community sealed off from the rest of the city, overcrowded, and starved. He then went further, traveling by train and hay cart to a Nazi transit camp located 100 miles east of Warsaw. Disguising himself as a prison guard, he observed the loading of Jews into train cars at Izbica Lubelska for the short trip to an extermination facility at Bełżec. By then, Karski's own skin had grown thick; he had seen cruelty and death in abundance and knew how to control his emotions. Yet the hardened spy became ill at what he saw in the Warsaw Ghetto and at the point of embarkation for doomed Jews.

Weeks later, when he arrived in London after a tortuous journey, he remembered every image and sound. His testimony, given directly to Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, was one of the first eyewitness accounts of Nazi atrocities to reach the West. On December 17, 1942, a dozen Allied governments joined in a collective denunciation of German war crimes; Eden himself spoke to a hushed session of Parliament:

I regret to have to inform the House that reliable reports have recently reached His Majesty's Government ... that the German authorities ... are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. In Poland which has been made the principal Nazi slaughterhouse, the ghettos established by the German invaders are being systematically emptied of all Jews except a few highly skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die from exposure and starvation or are deliberately massacred in mass executions. The number of victims of these bloody cruelties is reckoned in many hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women, and children.

The Polish government-in-exile considered Karski's message so important that its leaders decided not to order his return to Warsaw, but instead sent him to America, where he met at the White House with President Franklin Roosevelt and later, after countless public meetings, sat down to write this book.

For Karski, the end of the war was profoundly welcome but far from satisfying. The full magnitude of the Holocaust that he had warned against was finally exposed to the world; the horror was immeasurable and made the limited Allied efforts to stop or mitigate it appear shameful in their inadequacy. As for Poland, it was freed from Nazi domination only to be hijacked by Stalin and the Soviets, who used the presence of the Red Army in Central Europe to seize control of the government in Warsaw.

Without a free Poland to return to, Karski remained in the United States and, in 1954, became an American citizen. He received his Ph.D. from Georgetown University, where he taught for the next four decades, specializing in East European affairs and comparative government. After he retired I had the honor of teaching some of the same courses. But before that I remember him as a professor during the latter stages of his career. He was lanky, with piercing eyes, dignified, and immaculately dressed. Despite the difference in our ages, we shared a deep interest in the countries on the far side of the Berlin Wall, where it often seemed that nothing new and good would ever happen. Then the Cold War ended and Karski's dream of a liberated Poland was finally realized, almost fifty years from the night that he had first reported for duty as a second lieutenant in the Polish army.

Jan Karski's dedication to truth is memorialized in Israel, where he was made an honorary citizen and where a tree was planted in his name in Yad Vashem's Valley of the Righteous among the Nations. Shortly after his death in 2000, a statue bearing his likeness was dedicated on the Georgetown campus. His heroism has been recognized posthumously by the Senate of Poland and also by the United States, where, in June 2012, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. All these are fitting tributes but I suspect the honor that mattered most to Karski was presented seventy years earlier when he received a silver cigarette case from Władysław Sikorski, Poland's prime minister-in-exile, who clasped the young man's damaged hands and thanked him for all he had done on behalf of his countrymen.

In the words of James Russell Lowell's rousing hymn: "Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side." Perhaps more than most of us, Jan Karski faced such a choice in the starkest possible terms, and made his decision as courageously as one could. He did not hesitate or search for the rationalization that might have enabled him to soothe his conscience at reduced risk to his own skin. The lesson to be found in his example, therefore, is refreshingly unencumbered by moral complexity. To a certain type of philosopher, that might seem almost simplistic, but to a doer, it is the brightest star in the sky. Jan Karski was a patriot and a truth-teller; may his words always be read and his legacy never forgotten.

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

# Biographical Essay of Jan Karski

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We would all like to imagine that we would have tried to stop the Holocaust. We would have crept into the ghettos to learn the truth, found our way to the Allied capitals, and made the case for action. We would have understood the annihilation of the Jews while it was happening, and conveyed its horrors to the great and the good while there was time to act. Our social world would have included the suffering Jews and those with the power to change their fate, our war would have been one of conspiracy and concern. So, I suppose, we would all like to believe. The chances that any one of us would and could have behaved this way are about one in two billion. Of the two billion or so adults alive during the Second World War, only one of them achieved all of this: the Polish courier Jan Karski.

Karski was raised in the 1920s in the industrial city of Łódź—home at the time to as many Jews as was Palestine—and he studied with Jews at university in Lwów in the 1930s. He trained as an artilleryman in the Polish army, a specialty where Jews were not at all prominent. But Jews, like everyone else in Poland, were subject to mandatory military service, and the armed services in interwar Poland were integrated. Karski then began a career in the diplomatic service, where Jews (with the exception of a few representatives of long-assimilated families) were not employed. As a young man he was a Catholic in faith and a patriot in his willingness to sacrifice for national independence.

The most important influence on young Karski was his older brother Marian, chief of the state police in Warsaw. When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Marian was one of the relatively few Polish high officials to remain in the capital until it fell on September 27. Uncertain of what to do, he decided to ask the Polish government, reestablishing itself in exile in France. It seems that Marian decided to entrust his younger brother with this mission. By the time the two brothers met in Warsaw in October, Jan had already cheated death.

His war had begun at the Polish base at Oświęcim (better known as Auschwitz), where Polish troops were quickly overwhelmed by the German strike. Driven deep into the hinterland, they encountered the Red Army, which had invaded Poland from the east on September 17, 1939. Poland had been attacked from both sides, doomed by a secret German–Soviet alliance. Karski’s commanding officers allowed the Soviets to disarm their units. Thus, as Karski recalled, “Polish men who, less than a month before, had left their homes to drive the Germans back to Berlin, were now being marched off to a nameless destination, surrounded by Soviet guns.”

By the end of September, Poland was doubly occupied, divided between a Nazi Germany and a Soviet Union that renewed their alliance with a Treaty on Borders and Friendship on the 28th of the month. In the lands of eastern Poland, the Soviets aimed to decapitate society by killing or deporting those Polish citizens with political pasts or notable ambitions. Their policy with prisoners-of-war was to release the enlisted men and keep the officers. Karski, who rightly sensed that something ill was afoot, managed to pass himself off as a simple soldier from working-class Łódź. Since his hometown was now under German rule, he was released into German custody. Thus he escaped the Soviet mass shootings of Polish officers known as the Katyń massacres. About 22,000 Polish citizens taken captive in the same circumstances as Karski were murdered by the Soviet NKVD. Karski himself was transferred to a German POW camp in Radom. When the Germans tried to send him from Radom to another camp, he jumped from the train and escaped. He made his way back to Warsaw and found his

brother, through whom he made contact with representatives of the emerging Polish Underground.

In these autumn weeks of 1939, Karski impressed them with his reliability, his memory, and his capacity for analysis. All seemed to agree that Jan Karski was a perfect candidate for a mission to the government-in-exile. He first agreed to undertake a survey of conditions of both Soviet and German occupation. A journey back east was a fiasco. Karski did find his way back across the border, smuggled along with a group of Jews escaping the German occupation. But no one in Lwów, his old university town, would speak to him. The Soviet NKVD had already so thoroughly penetrated the Polish Underground that his contacts suspected that his mission must be a Soviet provocation. Karski then surveyed Polish territories incorporated into the German Reich. From family members and others he learned of daily humiliations and mass deportations. In January 1940, Karski departed for France by way of the Carpathian Mountains and Slovakia. He made such a good impression upon government ministers with his reports that he was entrusted with a crucial political mission: to persuade the major Polish political movements to take part in a cooperative Underground state.

Thus his return mission to Poland placed Karski in the middle of Polish politics and made him many new contacts. He was no longer simply the client of his brother and a few groups in Warsaw; he was the mediator between a government-in-exile and a mass political society at home. His original purposes were soon obsolete: his brother and other political patrons in Warsaw were arrested and sent to Auschwitz—no longer a Polish army base but a German concentration camp. It was in some measure due to Karski's own talents that the Underground state did indeed come into existence, as a kind of holding tank for a future democratic Poland. Both the government-in-exile and the political parties took for granted that the rapid defeat in September 1939 had discredited Poland's experiment with authoritarianism in the 1930s. Victory in the war was to be followed by democratic elections. In the meantime, the major parties were to support the government-in-exile in the attempt to establish, insofar as was possible, the normal institutions of statehood under conditions of German occupation (under conditions of Soviet occupation this was unthinkable).

In June 1940, Karski was to return to France to report on progress. This time he and his guide were caught by the Gestapo in Slovakia, and Karski was tortured. Afraid that he would break and tell what he knew, he slit his wrists. He awoke in a hospital in a Slovak city, tied to the bed but able to see a newspaper headline announcing the fall of France. But all was not quite lost. The Polish government had been evacuated to London, and Karski was transferred to a hospital in German-occupied Poland, in Nowy Sącz. One Underground activist posing as a doctor helped him to slip out a request for poison, which was brought to him by another dressed as a nurse. But before they let him die with his secrets, the local resistance wanted to try to free him. One night Karski heeded the calls of the workers at his window to jump. He leapt naked into the darkness and was caught, dressed, and carried to a boat. He spent the rest of 1940 posing as a gardener on a rural estate, recovering his strength.

In early 1941, Karski was recruited for propaganda work. In Kraków he listened to British radio broadcasts and translated them for the Underground press. Again and again, the Polish resistance was wracked by German arrests; Karski lost a friend to Buchenwald. He was in Kraków when the Germans betrayed their Soviet ally and invaded the Soviet Union that June. In late 1941, he returned to Warsaw where he would work for perhaps the most noble institution of the Polish Underground, the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Home Army. It was staffed by outstanding Polish liberals and democrats, some of them of Jewish origin.

As Karski prepared himself in the summer of 1942 for another journey as a political courier—this time to London—he learned as much as he could about the Holocaust. For him, as for much of the Polish Underground, the shock of realization of the totality of German intentions came with the clearings of the Warsaw Ghetto that summer. Beginning on July 23, the Germans began to deport Jews

to the gas chambers of Treblinka at a rate of several thousand per day. Within about two months, some 265,040 Jews were sent to be gassed, and another 10,380 or so were killed in the ghetto itself. In late August 1942, right in the middle of these mass actions, Karski entered the Warsaw Ghetto twice. The initiative to arrange his passage by a secret route in seems to have come from Leon Feiner, an activist of the Jewish socialist party known as the Bund. Karski crept into the ghetto through a tunnel that led to the headquarters of the right-wing Zionist Jewish Military Union. In the ghetto he spoke with Feiner as well as Menachem Kirschenbaum, a Zionist. Both men explained the mechanisms of mass murder and the German aim to exterminate the Jews. Knowing that no force within Poland was in a position to halt such a determined German policy, they asked Karski to demand action from the Allies. They proposed that German cities be bombed and ethnic Germans be killed in open reprisals. They also told Karski to instruct Jewish activists abroad to conduct hunger strikes and to sacrifice their own lives to attract the attention to the ongoing tragedy. Karski confirmed much of what he had seen and heard by daringly smuggling himself into the transit ghetto at Izbica Lubelska through which Jews were sent to the death facility at Bełżec.

After mass one Sunday morning in September 1942, Karski departed for London, arriving in October. His political mission was to inform the Polish government about the state of Underground activity in Poland, but his personal priority was to communicate the reality of the Holocaust. He conveyed what he had seen and understood to the Polish prime minister and president with the request that the Vatican also be informed. Polish diplomats *did* inform the pope about the Holocaust to no effect. The Polish government had been reporting to its allies and the BBC about the Holocaust since the spring of 1942, and during the Warsaw deportations issued an unambiguous statement about the Holocaust: "This mass murder has no precedent in the history of the world, every known cruelty pale in comparison." Unlike the Polish government, Karski made no attempt to subsume the Holocaust within a larger account of the suffering of Polish citizens. In the weeks that followed he spoke to the American ambassador in London and virtually every significant British public intellectual. Neither the British nor the Americans responded to the pleas from the Jews of Warsaw for some immediate action to stop the Holocaust. The American ambassador found it unlikely that the United States would increase immigration quotas.

Karski also conveyed the message of the Warsaw Jews to Jewish leaders in London, including Shmuel Zygielbojm, a member of the National Council of the Polish government-in-exile. Not long thereafter, in January 1943, the Germans tried to deport several thousand more Jews from the ghetto and met armed resistance. The Jewish Underground in Warsaw then began to plan for an uprising. When the Germans entered the ghetto again on April 19, Jewish fighters drove them out by force. On the roof of the building into which Karski had been smuggled the previous August, Jews raised two flags: the Star of David alongside the Polish flag. Alone in the world, with little help from the Polish Underground and no help from anyone else, the remaining Jews of Warsaw fought the Germans for more than a month.

On May 4, 1943, the Polish prime minister issued this unambiguous appeal: "I call on my countrymen to give all help and shelter to those being murdered, and at the same time, before all humanity, which has for too long been silent, I condemn these crimes." By then the Germans were moving from block to block, burning out Jews from their bunkers with flame throwers. On May 12, Zygielbojm committed suicide, leaving a note: "Though the responsibility for the crime of the murder of the entire Jewish nation rests above all upon the perpetrators, indirect blame must be borne by humanity itself." For the rest of his life Karski felt the weight of responsibility for Zygielbojm's death.

In April 1943, during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Soviet Union broke diplomatic relations

with Poland, even though both were fighting Nazi Germany. The tide of the war had now turned, and Stalin no longer had any need to pretend to respect the legal Polish government. His pretext for seeking to discredit it was the German revelation of the mass shooting at Katyń, where the Soviet NKVD had killed thousands of Karski's brother officers in 1940. The Soviets naturally blamed the Germans, a version that the British and Americans found it most convenient to endorse. The Poles could hardly accept this lie, and they called for an independent investigation. Thus Stalin used the revelation of his own crimes against Poland as the justification to end official contact with the Polish government. It was perhaps this that prompted Karski's visit to Washington, DC, in June 1943.

Poland began the war under double German–Soviet occupation, then was occupied entirely by Germany, and finally was occupied entirely by the Soviet Union. Karski's mission was to build sympathy for Poland on the basis of Poland's resistance to the Nazis and to help the Americans understand the danger of the Soviets. But as before, he treated it as his personal responsibility to inform everyone who mattered about the course of the Holocaust.

In a meeting with Franklin D. Roosevelt that July, Karski informed the American president, unbidden, that millions of Jews had already been murdered, that the mass extermination of the Jews was a crime of a different order than the persecution of Poles, and that the Jewish nation would cease to exist without immediate Allied intervention. At this point about a hundred thousand Jews in Karski's native Łódź were still alive, and the large gas chambers at Auschwitz had only just become operational. Karski passed on Feiner and Kirschenbaum's request for retaliation against Germans. Roosevelt did not pursue the subject. In America as in Britain, Karski spoke to leading politicians and public figures about the Holocaust and once again had the impression that no one grasped the mechanics of the goals of the Final Solution.

After all of these appearances, Karski's career as a secret courier was obviously over. So in early 1944, during a second stay in Washington, Karski composed the book that has just been reissued, *Story of a Secret State*. Written to improve the image of Poland and to gain American support for Poland in a coming conflict with Soviet power, the book was an exercise of a rather different sort than Karski's previous reports as a courier. As he was dictating the book in a New York hotel room to translator Krystyna Sokołowska, the Red Army was crossing into Polish territory for the second time during the war. So in describing his exploits, Karski had to protect not only all of his living contacts but all of the Underground's methods, since what remained of it would have to confront the NKVD.

In all of his communications, whether in conversation, confidential reports, or his bestselling book, Karski was perfectly consistent on one issue: the unprecedented character of the Holocaust of the Jews. As he concluded, "Never in the history of mankind, never anywhere in the realm of human relations did anything occur to compare with what was inflicted on the Jewish population of Poland." To us today this seems so straightforward that we might forget that Karski's message went unheeded in London and Washington. In the middle of the war, no one in any Allied capital wanted to give the impression that it was being fought for the Jews. As the war came to an end, Karski had difficulty explaining the dangers of Soviet rule to American Jewish audiences, who correctly understood the arrival of the Red Army as the only hope for the survival of fellow Jews in Europe. Soviet propaganda did its part by calling Karski an anti-Semite. Then the Cold War began, Karski went to work for the American side, and the wartime history of Poland fell into the shade of the Iron Curtain.

In our own post–Cold War world, in which the Second World War becomes a site of wishful moralization about the Holocaust and much else, Karski remains a marginal figure, though for another reason. His incontestable heroism reminds us that the Allies knew about the Holocaust but were not much interested. Karski recalls our weaknesses, one of which is that we forget them.

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# Defeat

ON THE NIGHT of August 23, 1939, I attended a particularly gay party. It was given by the son of the Portuguese Minister in Warsaw, Mr. Susa de Mendes. He was about twenty-five, my age, and the two of us were good friends. He was the fortunate brother of five charming and beautiful sisters. I saw one of them frequently and was looking forward with keen anticipation to meeting her again that night.

I had not been back in Poland long. After my graduation from the University of Lwów in 1935 and the traditional year in the army, I went abroad, to Switzerland, Germany, and then to England, pursuing researches in the highly interesting and erudite subject of demography. After three years spent in the great libraries of Europe, working at my thesis, improving my knowledge of French, German, and English, and familiarizing myself with the customs of those nations, the death of my father recalled me to Warsaw.

Although demography—the science and statistics of populations—was, and has remained, my favorite subject, it was slowly becoming apparent that I had little or no aptitude for scientific writing. I dawdled and lingered in the completion of my doctor's thesis and most of my work was rejected as unacceptable. This was the only cloud—and one that disturbed me little—in my otherwise clear and sunny prospect.

The atmosphere of the party was carefree, festive, and in some respects almost lyrical in mood. The huge drawing room of the Legation was adorned in elegant if somewhat romantic style. The wallpaper was a cool shade of blue and contrasted with the dark, severe Italian furniture. The lights were subdued and everywhere were ornate vases of long-stemmed flowers that added their scent to the perfumes of the gayly dressed women. The company was congenial and soon, cheerful and excited discussions spread about the room. I remember some of the topics: a heated defense of the beauties of the Warsaw botanical gardens against the alleged superiority of rival spots in Europe; exchanges of opinions on the merits of the revival of the famous play, *Madame Sans-Gêne*; bits of scandal and the usual sorties of wit when someone discovered that my good friends, Stefan Leczewski and Mlle. Marcelle Galopin, had vanished from the room—a custom of theirs. Politics were hardly touched.

We drank wine and danced interminably, mostly the airy, mobile European dances, first a waltz, then a tango, then a figured waltz. Later, Helene Susa de Mendes and her brother demonstrated the intricacies of the Portuguese tango.

During the course of the evening I made a number of appointments for the following week. I finally succeeded in convincing Miss de Mendes that I was indispensable as a guide to Warsaw. I made a luncheon and a dinner appointment with two friends, Mr. Leczewski and Mr. Mazur. I promised to meet Miss Obromska the next Sunday and later had to excuse myself when I recollected that it was my aunt's birthday. I was to telephone Mlle. Galopin to arrange the time of our next riding hour.

The party ended late. The farewells were lengthy, and outside, various groups continued to take leave of each other and to make appointments and arrangements for the balance of the week. I came home tired but so full of intoxicating plans that it was difficult to fall asleep.

It seemed my eyes had hardly closed when there was a loud hammering at the front door. I dragged myself out of bed and began to walk down the steps, breaking into an angry run as the hammering increased in volume. I yanked open the door. An impatient, surly policeman standing on the steps handed me a slip of red paper, grunted unintelligibly, and turned away.

It was a secret mobilization order. It informed me that I was to leave Warsaw within four hours and



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