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## Jan Karski's valiant failures<sup>1</sup>

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 represented by German occupation in World War II?

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.

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 halfway normal life, most would never have done. Others responded with bleak resignation. Still others nurtured illusions that made their situation seem less desperate.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally an address given at the Polish consulate in Sydney on 29 November 2012, to mark the 70th anniversary of the presentation by the Polish government-in-exile of its Note to the Allies on 10 December 1942 entitled 'The mass extermination of Jews in German-occupied Poland'. It was first published in *Zachor* (Apr. 2013) pp. 25–33 (*Zachor* is the journal of the Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants).

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

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

After successfully graduating in law and diplomacy at Lwów 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. Karski had graduated top of his class at both the military academy and in his foreign affairs training. He seemed destined for a brilliant 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 unit were overwhelmed by the initial German onslaught.

Retreating in confusion towards Lwów in the south-east, Karski and many of his comrades were taken prisoner by invading Soviet forces who were bent on gathering the fruits of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact's secret division of territorial 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, realise it at the time, he thereby escaped being murdered by a bullet in the head in an NKVD cellar.<sup>2</sup>

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 picked himself up and set off on foot for Warsaw

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2 Some 22,000 Polish officers, who were taken prisoner by the Soviet Union when they invaded eastern Poland, were murdered at Katyn and other locations in the western USSR in April and May 1940. Few escaped, and it is, therefore, highly likely that this would have been Karski's fate also.

through a wintry and devastated Poland. 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 as a courier by his underground superiors on a dangerous and circuitous journey via Slovakia and Hungary to Angers in France, where the emergent Polish government-in-exile was located during the *drôle de guerre*.

There he had many adventures, mainly of a political kind, including struggling to maintain cordial relations with feuding Polish factions and coping with grillings from senior ministers. He was also treated to a dressing down from the Prime Minister, General Władysław Sikorski, who viewed him as a supporter of the Pilsudskiite Sanacja regime,<sup>3</sup> which Sikorski's government had effectively supplanted. 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 (a senior Sanacja official turned underground activist) had been seized by the Gestapo, he was dispatched on another liaison journey to France with much sensitive information in his head and a potentially 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 that he had hidden in his boot before leaving Warsaw. Dismayed that they may lose valuable intelligence, the Germans dispatched him to be nursed back to torturable health in a prison hospital across the border in occupied Poland.

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3 'Sanacja' is the term commonly applied to the political movement led by Pilsudski and the regime he set up after his armed coup in May 1926. The Sanacja regime lasted beyond his death in 1935 until the military defeat of Poland by Nazi Germany in 1939. The word 'sanacja' derives from the regime's declared intention of carrying out a 'moral cleansing' of the nation. For more on the Sanacja regime, see Antony Polonsky, *Politics in Independent Poland 1921–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 183 and passim; and, Rafal Pankowski, *The Populist Radical Right in Poland: The patriots* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 15–21.

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

A unit headed by one of Karski's underground colleagues, Józef Cyrankiewicz, then a socialist leader, but later to become a prime minister of communist Poland, organised a remarkable 'Boy's Own Annual' escape from the prison facility. Karski was still gravely ill and was lucky to physically survive the adventure.

Later, the Germans shot over 30 people for their presumed involvement in the plot to rescue the high-value prisoner. This typical act of German retribution left Karski feeling bitter anguish for the rest of his life for having 'caused' these deaths.

Returning to Warsaw, he was deployed for a while in less torrid resistance activities with the underground state's Bureau of Information and Propaganda (BIP) 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* (ethnic Polish blackmailer of Jews), who accosted them at a Warsaw railway station. Sadly, at the country estate to which Karski had escorted them, where a wealthy sympathiser maintained a kind of safe house for the underground, they were later to be betrayed to the Germans by a peasant who worked on the estate.

In late 1942, Karski was chosen by the underground Delegate,<sup>4</sup> Cyryl Ratajski,<sup>5</sup> to undertake a high-level mission to the government-in-exile and senior Allied representatives in London. The main priorities for his mission, in addition to liaison between the underground and the

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4 The Delegate was the civilian leader of the Polish wartime underground organisation that had been formed and was subordinate to the Polish government-in-exile situated first in Angers and, from 1940, in London. The émigré government was a coalition formed from moderate prewar mainstream parties, but excluding Sanacja representatives. Ratajski, a pre-Sanacja politician of some note, represented a centrist party influenced by Catholic social teaching. On the Delegate's role, see 'Delegatura rządu na kraj', *Słownik historii Polski* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1969).

5 See [pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyryl\\_Ratajski](http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyryl_Ratajski).

government-in-exile, were the growing Polish concerns about Soviet intentions and the unfolding mass murder of Jews by the Germans in occupied Poland.

Since Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Allies were pressing the Poles to be nice to Moscow, despite its having occupied much of Poland in 1939–41, murdered many of its people and deported many more hundreds of thousands in lethally inhuman conditions to Siberia and Central Asia. Karski's central task was 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.

His other key priority was to convey the uniquely hideous nature of the German crimes against the Jews, a message that was encountering some scepticism. Karski's lifelong sympathy for Jewish people made him a natural advocate for their desperate cause.

He had met the Polish Jewish Bundist leader Leon Fajner and a senior Zionist leader 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 Bełżec 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 covert facilitators, the guide who was accompanying him hustled him out before suspicions were aroused.

After an eventful journey via Germany, occupied France, Spain and Gibraltar, including an initial period in British detention, Karski finally began his London mission in November 1942. From here on, his war service was 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 Prime Minister Sikorski and President Władysław Raczkiewicz, and with senior British officials and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Karski sought an audience with Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but felt he botched his pitch on that score with Eden, who denied him the opportunity.

He also met Polish Jewish émigré leaders and a great many British celebrities. With his photographic memory, graphic eyewitness observations, linguistic facility, and his gaunt frame and face still ravaged by Gestapo torture, he again made a memorable impression.

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

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

On 18 January 1943, Raczynski presented further demands to the Allied Council, calling on them to bomb Germany in reprisal for the continuing atrocities against 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.

At the level of declaratory policy, Karski's message about 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 were reluctant to make saving the Jews who were still alive a priority. And they saw nothing but downsides in drastic responses. In their view, the best that 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 scepticism 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 at the heart of their national interests.

There had been, in fact, a strange and persistent reluctance, especially further away from the Central European ghettos and death camps, to recognise the enormity of what was happening. Yet 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 were also reluctant to accept the dire reports and warnings that were accumulating. Many, desperately hoping that they could not be true, convinced themselves that they were not; 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 that he managed to speak to was even more impressive than in London, including Secretary of State Cordell Hull and President Franklin D. 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-in-exile'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 meanwhile bubbled to the surface.

German occupation forces in the Soviet Union had discovered some of the mass graves of the Polish officers that were murdered by the NKVD secret police, and publicly invited the International Red Cross to send a delegation to investigate the site. At this point, while in no doubt about the German motivation behind making their discovery public,

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 messages were not getting through.

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, in conversation with Roosevelt, 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 Belżec. Frankfurter listened carefully, and seemed to be struck by the gruesome detail of Karski's eyewitness 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 forms a warm attachment to her and, wanting to protect her, 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 poignant, total 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 United States, while it produced quite a stir, from his own point of view ended 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 United States 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 bestseller but, when fame abated and the situation in Poland after the war went from bad to worse, Karski decided to settle in America 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 US State Department failed. 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 assured Karski that he would give due emphasis to efforts by Poles to help Jews, as well as their failures, their at times callous indifference and their all too frequent outright betrayals. He also undertook

to cover Karski's 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 organising 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 that, though it revived painful memories, must also have brought him some healing and satisfaction.

With his Polish-Jewish wife, the dancer and choreographer Pola Nirenska, he visited Israel, where he was recognised as one of the Righteous Among Nations at Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Other international honours came his way, including posthumously, when President Barack Obama awarded him the highest US honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, referring incongruously as he did so to 'Polish death camps'.

As the role that he had played during the war, and his views on things, became better known, some intra-Polish controversy arose. His association with *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.

His left-wing views also evoked suspicion. He had been inclined to support the Polish government-in-exile's Premier Stanisław Mikołajczyk's doomed efforts to reach a degree of accommodation with Moscow.<sup>6</sup> 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.

One of his close colleagues in the underground had been Józef Cyrankiewicz who, in 1948, had subordinated his rump Polish Socialist Party to the communists to form the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party), which was thereafter the ruling party of communist Poland. Some Poles were unpleasantly struck that, during a 1970s visit to Poland for research purposes, Karski had an apparently warm and emotional reunion with Cyrankiewicz, who was by then discredited

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6 See [pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanisław\\_Mikołajczyk](http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanisław_Mikołajczyk); Janusz Gmitruk, *Stanisław Mikołajczyk: Trudny powrót* (Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego, 2002).

and out of power. Such a cordial meeting between them was perhaps more understandable given their wartime comradeship and the fact that Cyrankiewicz's group had saved his life.

But Cyrankiewicz's betrayal of his former underground colleagues had followed show trials of underground heroes, and the execution of such people as the Polish army officer and resistance fighter Witold Pilecki. Pilecki had volunteered to deliberately become a prisoner in Auschwitz, where he organised an underground group that collected and smuggled out intelligence about the crimes being committed there by the Germans. The work of Pilecki, a man with a background in Poland's often anti-Semitic nationalist right, contributed greatly to the message that Karski took to the Allies about the mass murders that Nazi Germany was committing behind a wall of stealth, lies and euphemism.

Karski never hesitated to reach across the barricades. Raised a Pilsudskiite, he became a faithful servant of the Polish government-in-exile headed by Sikorski and other staunch adversaries of the Sanacja regime that Pilsudski had created, and which had, in the years after his death, veered in an increasingly anti-Semitic direction. Though of the Catholic left, Karski became an enthusiastic supporter of the right-wing Front for the Rebirth of Poland of Zofia Kossak. A distinguished Polish writer from a famous artistic Polish family, and an ardent Catholic, Kossak felt that Polish Jews often had little sympathy with Polish national objectives.

But when she became aware of the Germans' policy of genocide, she denounced it as an offence before man and God, and called on all Poles to resist and do whatever they could to rescue their suffering Jewish brothers and sisters. She was one of the original founders of the Polish underground organisation Żegota, which did more to save Jews during the German occupation than any other similar group in any country.

In his book *The Terrible Secret* (1980), the distinguished Jewish historian of Europe Walter Laqueur, no champion of Poland, makes it clear that the efforts of the Polish government-in-exile and its couriers, Karski in particular, deserve much of the credit for exposing the nature of the 'final solution'. And he comments aptly:

That there has been a great deal of anti-Semitism in modern Polish history is not a matter of dispute, but it is also true that help was extended to the Jews after 1939 by some who had been their bitterest enemies before ... In view of the Polish pre-war attitudes towards Jews, it is not surprising that there was so little help, but that there was so much.<sup>7</sup>

Under communism, Poles were not exposed to much information about the misdeeds of ethnic Poles against Jews during and just after the war. The communist regime tended to absorb the uniquely horrible fate of Jews, including Polish Jews, within the overall story and statistics about Poland's wartime martyrdom, and to restrict discussion of grassroots Polish anti-Semitism. For a period in the 1960s, sections of the ruling regime even sought to incite and exploit anti-Semitism for crudely political purposes, with devastating effects on Poland's reputation.

Recent research inside Poland and abroad is now more openly addressing the darker sides of Polish–Jewish wartime relations. For many Poles, this is painful and some respond angrily and polemically, sometimes reviving the argument that Jews were disproportionately represented in the postwar communist regime and its brutal security forces who persecuted Poland's wartime Home Army (the *Armia Krajowa*) heroes. But, while there is some truth in this and other arguments that they deploy, they provide no justification for denial or suppression of the facts. It is a public discussion that has to happen, however painful it may be. If he were still alive, Karski would welcome it wholeheartedly.

Karski was a man of broad and undogmatic sympathies. Because of their history, Poles have tended to be hostile to their neighbours to the 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 seldom 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* (the patriotic Polish intelligentsia of the

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7 Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (New York: Owl Books, 1998), pp. 106–07.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, typically deriving from the *déclassé* nobility of partitioned Poland): a gentleman diplomat, with a stylish home and manners and egalitarian attitudes.

His advice to them was explicitly unheroic: above all, be realists; avoid Polonocentrism; don't expect to be rewarded for your noble actions; don't expect anyone to write you a cheque for Solidarity; do all you can to get into NATO, but remember that once you're there, that's just the beginning.<sup>8</sup>

At Wiesel's conference, Karski struck an eloquent note of bitter elegy about his Jewish brothers and sisters of Poland and Europe:

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.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Ambassador Andrzej Jaroszyński, Polish ambassador to Australia, 2008–13, personal communication.

9 As quoted in E. Thomas Wood & Stanisław M. Jankowski, *Karski: How one man tried to stop the Holocaust* (New York: Wiley, 1994), pp. 255–56.

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