

# **THE EMISSARY**



**Maciej Kozłowski**

# **THE EMISSARY**

**Story of Jan Karski**

English translation  
Joanna Maria Kwiatowska



## ***Foreword***



*Jan Karski was a messenger. During the Second World War, he risked his life infiltrating the Warsaw Ghetto and crossing occupied Europe to carry news of the Holocaust to the free world; news of such suffering and atrocity that many refused to believe it.*

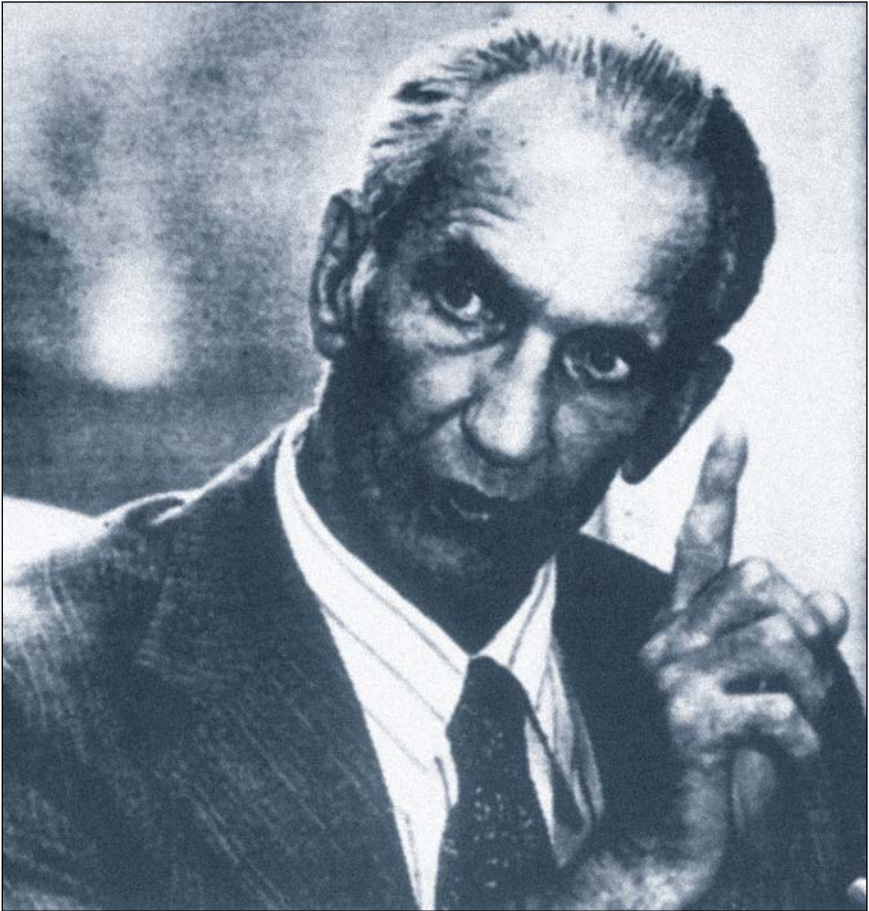
*He was also a messenger throughout his 50 years as an American, bringing to us messages about freedom based on his experience in wartime Poland; messages that he delivered to generations of students seeking to understand the world of international affairs.*

*Jan Karski was brave; he was resolute; and he demanded of us what he demanded of himself: that we face with clarity the existence of injustice and evil in the world and act with courage to defeat them. Above all, his message was that freedom must be defended. His personal courage and commitment gave weight to his convictions, and his understanding of the world gave depth to the personal history he embodied.*

*Those who knew Jan Karski will never forget him; and his message will continue to light the path of freedom-loving peoples throughout the years to come. No one could ask for a finer legacy.*

***Bill Clinton***





*A photograph of Jan Karski taken from  
a poster advertising one of his lectures about the Holocaust,  
May 1982*

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#14164.

A leader of the Polish Underground, employing the pseudonym Karaki, is said to be in London to get in touch with the Polish Government, following which he will come to the United States. Foreign Nationalities Branch in Washington would like to find out about his mission.

Please request Chips to notify us regarding the above-mentioned matter.



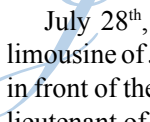
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July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1943, 10:15 a.m. Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. The limousine of Jan Ciechanowski, Polish Ambassador to the United States, arrives in front of the White House. The ambassador is being accompanied by a young lieutenant of the Polish Underground Home Army, not yet 30 years old. A few months ago, he was sent on the dangerous mission as an emissary from German occupied Poland to London, the base of the Polish government-in-exile. He brought with him detailed reports from the military and civilian underground authorities in Poland, and provided an account, hitherto unparalleled in extent and not heard by the outside world, about the ongoing extermination of over three million Jews, the entire Jewish population of Poland. Now he is to present that same account to the most powerful man in the world, in whose hands rests the outcome of the war.

*President Roosevelt is sitting behind his desk. Behind him, I see the United States flag... It was a significant moment for me. Even after all these years, I remember it perfectly. "I wanted to see you," he says, "because the matters of your nation are dear to my heart."*

This is how Jan Karski, the Polish emissary and later professor at Georgetown University, related the experience of meeting the American president nearly half a century later to Stanisław M. Jankowski, a Polish journalist.

What happened at that memorable meeting, Karski later recounted numerous times. The fragments of his story dealing with the Holocaust have been recorded on film and are part of the permanent historical exhibit at the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem.

The story is as remarkable as the fate of this young Polish diplomat and officer, whose wartime adventures could serve as the basis for many a screenplay and moviescript.



*Jan Koziński (later  
Karski) in Łódź,  
1931*

Jan Koziński (later known by his underground pseudonym Jan Karski) was born as the eighth child of a Polish leather merchant on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 1914, shortly before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the outbreak of World War I. The population of Łódź at the time was multicultural and multiethnic. It was a mixture of Poles, Jews, Germans and Russians, generally living in harmony. The Koziński family were Polish Roman Catholics. Jan's father owned a small leatherworkshop. In the tenement house where the family resided, most of the other tenants were Jewish. Many years later in 1982, upon receiving honorary citizenship of the State of Israel, Jan Karski is going to remember and pronounce the names of his Jewish friends from childhood. As a young man growing up in the free Second Polish Republic, Koziński attends a Catholic school run by Jesuits. After completing secondary school, he signs up to study law and diplomacy at the University of John Casimir Vasa in Lwów.

He completes his university studies with all possible honors. Soon afterwards, he fulfills his military duty by serving one year at Włodzimierz Wołyński base. Upon completion, he receives the rank of second lieutenant of the artillery. Now that he is finally able to focus on his true career, he chooses to enter the diplomatic service. He first undergoes training in Geneva and London and passes the required examinations, once again with flying colors, in order to begin work as a junior officer at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The talents of the young diplomat are quickly recognized. Following several months of work, Koziński is promoted to the rank of secretary. His diplomatic career is cut short by the dramatic developments leading up to World War II.

The year is 1938. The Nazi party, in power in Germany since 1933, openly advocates imperialistic and racist policies. The democratic governments of the West are still under the illusion that the war which threatens to break out in Europe can be prevented by a series of concessions and a general policy of appeasement. And so, Austria is the first to be annexed by Germany, without a single shot being fired. Several months later, Czechoslovakia follows suit. The year is 1939 and Poland is the next target. Germany presents Poland with an ultimatum related to incorporating into Germany the "Polish Corridor" or "Gdańsk Corridor" (Polish territory separating the German enclave of East Prussia from the German Province of Pomerania).

L. DZ. 4336 1661

# ŚWIADECTWO

*1st Lieut.*  
*Kozielewski Jan*

URODZONY W DNIU 24 IV ROKU 1914 W Łódź  
UKOŃCZYŁ W CZASIE OD 3 R. DO 28 VI 1936 R.

SZKOŁĘ PODCHORAŻYCH REZERWY ARTYLERJI

I OTRZYMAŁ NASTĘPUJĄCE OCENY:

WYSZKOLENIE BOJOWE	<i>bardzo dobry</i>	ŁĄCZNOŚĆ	<i>dobry</i>
INSTRUKCJA STRZELANIA	<i>zup. dobry</i>	GAZOZNAWSTWO	<i>bardzo dobry</i>
BERENDZNAWSTWO I TOPOGRAFIA	<i>bardzo dobry</i>	ORGANIZACJA WOJSKA I P.W.	<i>bardzo dobry</i>
WYSZKOLENIE PIESZE	<i>zup. dobry</i>	WYSZKOLENIE SAPERSKIE	<i>bardzo dobry</i>
WYSZKOLENIE STRZELECKIE	<i>zup. dobry</i>	NAUKA O KONIU	<i>dobry</i>
IAZDA KONNA	<i>dobry</i>	WYCHOWANIE FIZYCZNE	<i>zup. dobry</i>
BATERIA ZAPRZEŻONA	<i>zup. dobry</i>	DOWCZDZENIE	<i>zup. dobry</i>
DZIAŁOCZYNY	<i>rybikun</i>	SPRAWCZANIE	<i>zup. dobry</i>
OPIS SPRZĘTU I AMUNICJA ART.	<i>bardzo dobry</i>	PILNOŚĆ	<i>bardzo dobry</i>
NAUKA SŁUŻBY WEWN.	<i>dobry</i>		

OSTATECZNY POSTĘP *bardzo dobry* LOKATA

*Kozielewski Jan*

NA PODSTAWIE UKOŃCZENIA KURSU Z WYNIKIEM POMYŚLNYM UZYSKAŁ  
W MYŚL ART. 44. ROZPORZĄDZENIA PREZYDENTA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ  
Z DNIA 7 PAŹDZIERNIKA 1936 R. O SŁUŻBIE WOJSKOWEJ PODOFICERÓW  
I SZEREGOWCÓW TYTUŁ

PODCHORAŻEGO REZERWY.

WŁODZIMIERZ, DNIA 28 VI 1936 R.

KOMENDANT SZKOŁY PODCHORAŻYCH  
REZERWY ARTYLERJI

*M. Jan Filcowski*  
MR. JAN FILCOWSKI  
podpułkownik

Drakonia (Lódź) „S.P.C.I.E.” Włodzisław  
ul. S. W. P. 10

Jan Kozielewski's diploma from the Artillery Reserve Officer Cadet School

Poland, which had been completely partitioned between Austria, Russia and Prussia from 1795 to 1918, does not agree to this concession, which would mean the beginning of the end of hard-won sovereignty. And the Polish government has faith in the assurances made by its allies, France and the United Kingdom. The German ultimatum is rejected. Following the visit of Germany's foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to the Soviet Union, during which a secret protocol is signed dividing Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, war is inevitable. Aware of its imminence, Polish authorities order the secret deployment of selected military units. Second Lieutenant Koziielewski is ordered to join the Fifth Horse-drawn Artillery Battery, stationed at Oświęcim, a small Polish town located near the border with the Greater German Reich, which after its formal incorporation into the Reich will then become the location of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp.

As the result of German bombardment on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939, the artillery unit is forced to withdraw east, having barely fired a shot. Under constant fire from German aircraft, the retreat becomes more and more chaotic as time goes on, and lasts over two weeks. On September 17<sup>th</sup>, the surviving members of the unit reach Tarnopol, where they learn that Soviet forces are now on Polish soil. Jan Koziielewski is captured by the Soviets and becomes a prisoner of war.

It seemed imminent that he was going to share the fate of the nearly 15 000 other imprisoned Polish officers, who – a year later – were going to be killed by the NKVD in mass executions in the Katyń forest and elsewhere.

This is not what happened however. The sequence of events that followed could almost be labeled as miraculous. In effect, the young Polish officer, following several weeks of imprisonment, returns back to Warsaw.

News reaches the POWs held at the Soviet camp that they may have a chance to escape. The Soviets and the Germans, partners at the time, had decided to exchange war prisoners. It is decided that some of the Polish private soldiers – but not the officers – captured by the Soviets, and originating from regions of Poland annexed by the Third Reich, will be given over to the Germans exchanged for soldiers originating from areas under Soviet control. Here Koziielewski sees his chance. Why, he was born in Łódź, which now under the name of Litzmannstadt has been incorporated into the Reich. He has his birth certificate... and only has to exchange his officer's uniform for that of a private – which turns out to be easy – and report to camp authorities.

The exchange of the two columns of prisoners takes place on a dreary autumn day in the border town of Przemyśl, after which one column heads west and the other one east.

The aim of the Germans is to transport the prisoners to a camp in East Prussia.

The route from Przemyśl to Prussia cuts through central Poland.

The dense forest between Kielce and Radom provided an exceptional opportunity... One only had to quickly persuade fellow “passengers” of the cattle car to aid those that had made the decision to escape by getting through the small opening...

Then to leap into the unknown...

In Warsaw, the escaped prisoner of war quickly comes into contact with the developing underground insurgence movement. He is supplied with counterfeit identification papers and directed to underground headquarters. The leaders of the underground have highly important plans for him. They urgently need to contact General Władysław Sikorski and the Polish government-in-exile, which has recently been formed in France.

The dramatic fate of defeated Poland was compounded by a no less dramatic political conflict. When Poland was attacked by Germany and then the Soviet Union, members of the *Sanacja* movement were in power in the Polish government – heirs to the ideology of the late Marshal Józef Piłsudski who had passed away in 1935. The dramatic defeat in September 1939 came as a real shock to the entire nation, and it was for this reason that *Sanacja*'s opponents took over as the government-in-exile. General Władysław Sikorski, a military leader of great renown and the most popular politician within the opposition, came to head the newly-formed government and army. The political activists who had begun building the framework of an underground state in Poland wanted to quickly relay information to the government authorities in France about the birth of a new political movement, as well as to receive clear directives and instructions for further action.

Why was Second Lieutenant Jan Kozieliwski the one chosen for this mission? He was not associated with any political faction. He was said to be a *państwowiec* – and to be labeled a “statesman” in Polish in those days one did not need to be a politician, but needed to be seen as caring about the interests of the whole nation – even though his family background put him closer to Piłsudski's followers than to the former opposition, which had now taken the lead.

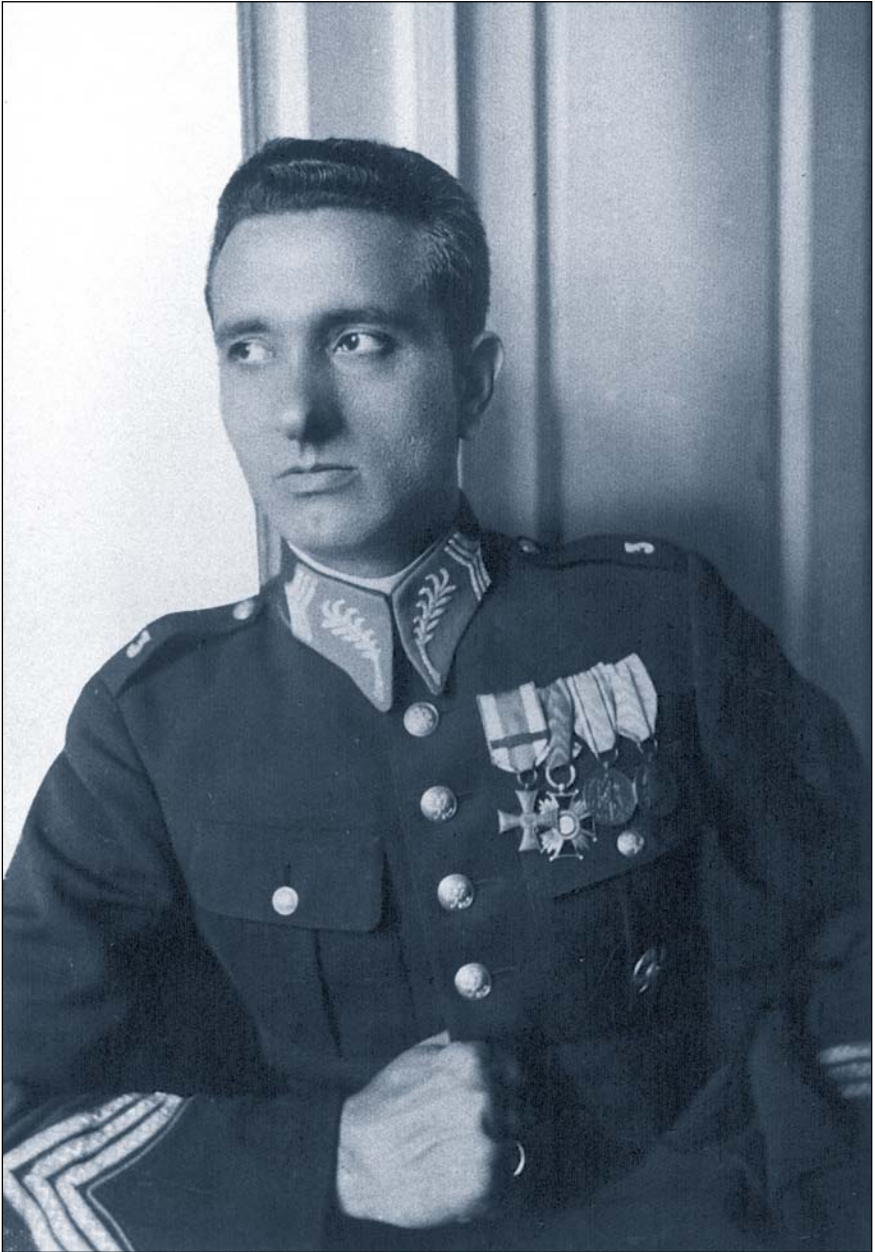
He did not disappoint the leaders of the underground. During his missions, the envoy Witold Kucharski (the *nom de guerre* he adopted) was, as he later described himself, akin to a gramophone record, always striving to faithfully reproduce the secret information he was meant to convey, only in the presence of those for whom it was intended, and irrespective of their political background.

Second Lieutenant Kozielski, a.k.a. Witold Kucharski, is sworn into the underground by “Prezes” (“President”) Marian Borzęcki, the head of the Civic Committee, the first civilian insurgent operational cell, subordinate to the new government. He is to travel to Paris with reports on the situation in occupied Poland, and bring back to Poland directives and instructions for the nascent underground movement.

Before setting off, Jan Kozielski pays a visit to his older brother Marian, the chief of the National Police Force in Warsaw. The conversation between the two brothers is intense, because Marian Kozielski also wants to receive clear directives telling him what course to take, from the Polish authorities in France, who include his former commander, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski. Marian Kozielski does not know whether to join the underground or to remain at his post, because the Germans have not dissolved the Polish police force. At the time, people thought that the war will be over quickly. “The sun is higher, and Sikorski is nigher,” they were saying with the coming of spring in 1940. The underground movement just coming into existence in Poland assumed with great confidence that an armed uprising would provide backing for an ultimately victorious offensive led by the Western Allies. An armed police force could have a significant role to play in the event of such an uprising.

With counterfeit identification papers supplied by “Prezes,” and gold dollars from his sister-in-law, the messenger known as Witold boards a train to Przemyśl, the same city where just several months before he had crossed the newly-created border dividing German and Soviet-occupied territory in a convoy with other POWs. This time, he is to cross the border illegally, make his way to Lwów, and cross the border from Soviet Ukraine to Romania, where a Polish embassy is still operating and is to organize the subsequent part of his journey to France.

The first part of the journey went smoothly. “Witold Kucharski” was accompanied by a guide, one of his brother’s trusted subordinates, a police officer of Jewish descent, who – like many other Jews – has an intuition that he will be safer out of the Germans’ reach. Witold crosses the border with a group of about a dozen Jews fleeing from the German occupation. After several hours, he is once again in familiar surroundings, in Lwów.



*Jan's older brother, Colonel Marian Kozielski*

The guide finds him a place to stay at the house of a trusted Jewish family and forbids him to move around the city. It is easier to trick the Germans with fake identification than to trick the Soviets. When the guide does not return at the agreed time, Witold decides to strike out on his own. He learns however that the Soviet-Romanian border is extremely well-guarded with the help of canine units. He is unable to find anyone who would agree to help him cross it. Even his police officer guide is unable to help once they get in touch with each other again. He consequently has no other choice than to return back to Warsaw. Fortunately, the border, which he had crossed illegally a couple of days earlier, is just as easy to cross in the opposite direction.

The underground organization which had decided upon sending him to France does not abandon the idea. They prepare a new plan. This time the journey is to take him through the mountains to Slovakia, and then on to Hungary. It is winter, the mountains have experienced heavy snowfall, and they are passable only on skis.

In late January 1940, the Polish emissary gets on a train headed for Zakopane, a Polish ski resort. The excursion is organized as though it were a ski trip. The group is joined by a Polish air force officer wanting to join the Polish forces beginning to assemble in France. The weather is beautiful and the temperature freezing. The highlander guide knows which mountain passes are left unguarded. For Karski, this is the first time in a long while that he finds himself on skis, which makes his journey difficult, but he bears it well and the group makes its way through the snow-covered mountain range. After several days, without any major difficulties save for blistered feet and severe exhaustion, they reach Košice, where a post has been established for transporting Polish officers to France, to join to the newly-formed Polish army. The next stop, Budapest, also has a ready liaison base, designated by the codename "Romek." The Hungarians, though highly dependent on the Germans, secretly support the Polish cause and turn a blind eye on Polish underground activity. Having recuperated after the journey across the mountains, with his blistered feet healed, the Polish emissary once again receives false identification papers and makes his way by train across Yugoslavia and Italy to France. In the first days of March 1940, he reaches Angers, where the Polish government-in-exile has formally been stationed since November 1939.

Professor Stanisław Kot, an activist of the peasants party, is Minister of the Interior, and it is his job to look after the newly-arrived messenger from Poland. The emissary writes several reports on the situation in the homeland, including a memo entitled "The Jewish Question in Poland."



In a highly incisive and honest manner, he describes attitudes within Polish society towards the Jews, without denying the presence of anti-Semitism. Because some of his observations prove to be too shocking for the Polish politicians staying in France, Professor Kot asks him to tone down certain expressions within the text. Professor Kot also arranges for him to meet with governmental representatives, most importantly with the prime minister and commander-in-chief, General Władysław Sikorski. General Sikorski presents to the envoy his view of how the Underground Polish State should be organized in the future:

*The movement (...) must not be confined merely to the function of resistance but must take shape as an actual state. All the apparatus of a state must be created and maintained at all costs, no matter how crude it is. (...) [The] army must be unified into a whole rather than exist as an aggregate of atomic bodies, and (...) the military [has] to be integrated completely into the social and political structure. (...) It cannot be allowed to remain distant or isolated. The liaison must be complete and conditions of mutual responsibility must be made to prevail. (Story of a Secret State, p. 120 – 121)*

Several days later, Professor Kot presented to “Witold” the complete and detailed outline of the organization of the Polish underground. By this time, the system for transferring information between occupied Poland and its government stationed in Angers is well-organized. A system of specialized signals and codes is devised, to be used by the secret emissaries and couriers. In accordance with the instructions from January 1940, Karski is one of the first “to be imparted with the knowledge of the secret content of the directives and instructions being transmitted.”

Aside from instructions about the organization of the underground, “Witold” is to pass on specific information to different leaders of political parties and other political factions, as well as to other individuals in Poland who are of particular importance. In a detailed report following his second mission he is going to write that in total there were supposed to be nineteen different addressees. “Witold” does not receive any information in writing. He has to know everything by heart.

*I commit to memory the sentences I have just heard. I have not been as focused in ages as I am now, when I need to memorize the entire statute of the Underground Polish State. I am not allowed to forget a single word; I am to be a gramophone record. It is to be played to listeners in Kraków and in Warsaw so that they will be able to hear the words Professor Kot had “recorded” for them in Angers, which I then brought over the border. (From: Stanisław M. Jankowski, *Emisariusz “Witold,”* New York, 1991).*

Before his departure, “Witold” has one more assignment to carry out. Following his brother’s instructions, he is to contact General Kazimierz Sosnowski, Colonel Kozielowski’s former commander, who is currently the minister of national affairs.

The general, although glad to be able to meet the brother of his subordinate from the days of Piłsudski’s Legions, is unable to give a clear answer. The decision of whether to remain in the National Police Force or to join the underground Colonel Kozielowski will have to make on his own, following his own conscience.

“Witold’s” return journey also takes him through Budapest and happens without any major mishaps, except that it is now April and the mountains have to be crossed on foot, because the snow has melted in some parts. What does make the trip across the mountains difficult is the fact that Colonel Krajewski, the chief at the transit base in Hungary, has given “Witold” a rucksack filled with over 15 kilograms (about 40 pounds) of banknotes, which are to be used to finance the activities of the Polish underground. “Witold” is so exhausted that he attempts several times to hide the rucksack with the money inside in one of the many crevices he encounters in the rocks along the way, but his awareness of the weight of his mission prevails and the money safely finds its way to Zakopane.

The first stop where the “record Made in France” is played was Kraków. Here, “Witold” meets with political leaders, mainly of socialist factions. As he is to write later in yet another report, the plans brought over from France for the organization of the underground were received with much approval. Following several days of intense talks, he is ready to make his way to Warsaw. Having learned in Kraków that his brother is still in command of the Warsaw Police Force, he heads straight for his house after arriving back in the capital. On the doorstep, his sister-in-law informs him that Marian Kozielowski was taken away at night and arrested. Some time later, he is sent to the camp at Auschwitz.

In the months that “Witold” has been absent from Poland, the underground movement has grown in force. The network of dispatchers and secret posts is functioning with increasing efficiency. The activists working in the underground adopt aliases. Colonel Rowecki, commander of the Union for Armed Struggle (the name that the underground military force took on in January) is now called “Rakoń.” Kazimierz Pużak, the head of the socialists, is now “Bazyli,” while Stefan Korboński, the leader of the peasant party is now “Nowak.”

“Witold” meets them all one warm May afternoon, in a spacious apartment of one of the members of the underground. This is how Kazimierz Pużak records his impressions after meeting “Witold”:

As it turned out later, he had informed us most accurately on matters concerning government and emigration relations, and the delegation. As an emissary, he had an indispensable attribute – superb, virtually photographic, memory. The report that he wrote down for our Council came out with particular clarity, filled with the paragraphs taken from Professor Kot’s statute. Colonel Jakubowski, who arrived in July, following the disastrous events in France, presented to us a photograph of the Council’s statute, which matched exactly the verbal account of the statute made by “Witold.”

Obviously, the directives and instructions brought over by “Witold” had to be subject to changes and modifications. The concept of choosing three governmental “delegates,” one for each of the three sections of occupied Poland – the General Government, lands annexed by the Reich and lands annexed by the Soviets – turned out to be unrealistic. It also became necessary to standardize the organization of the armed forces, but the basic framework of the Polish Underground State remained unchanged and was to take its final form only after “Witold’s” departure on yet another mission.

Similarly as the previous time, the route was to lead through the mountains and to Hungary; not through the Tatras however – as that range was too heavily guarded in the summer – but through the less-elevated, forested Beskid range. This was another route that had been used since 1939 by couriers and officers hurrying to join the Polish army. This was going to be the 32<sup>nd</sup> time on this route for Franciszek “Myszka” Musiał, chosen to be “Witold Kucharski’s” guide.

And yet, Jan Karski had some vague misgivings from the very beginning of the trip. The situation at the front was not conducive to his good mood. Let’s recap: in April 1940, Germany had taken over Denmark and Norway, followed in May by occupation of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The German army appears to be undefeatable and following the fall of Belgium, the Maginot Line ceases to have any real military significance. June 4<sup>th</sup> marks the fall of Dunkirk.

*Although I believed, with nearly everyone in Warsaw, including the most well-informed, that France would hold and that Germany had over-extended herself in the offensive and would ultimately be crushed as a consequence, nevertheless, I could not help speculating on what the defeat of France would mean.*

*I was by now accustomed to considering remote eventualities, since the improbable frequently materialized in underground work and did so with appalling results. I realized that if France were defeated, I would be left in mid-air somewhere in Europe (...). The entire liaison system between Poland and the government was based on continental routes. If France collapsed, this system would collapse with it. (Story..., p. 136)* There was a much more imminent danger, however.

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, following a four day march, “Witold” and the guide reach the Slovakian village of Demjata, near the Hungarian border. The contact person in this village is Michał Muszyński. “Myszka” had availed himself of this man’s hospitality many times before, but unbeknownst to him, this Slovak of Polish origin has since been recruited by the Slovakian security force, which remains at the service of the Germans.

Their host was to wake them early in the morning, but instead they are roused out of their beds by Slovakian gendarmes. Although both the emissary and the guide had buried their packs in the forest prior to entering the village, “Witold” carries on his person incriminating evidence – a roll of film given to him in Kraków by one of the political leaders. In an attempt to destroy it, he casts it into a bucket of water, hoping this will go unnoticed. The gendarme is vigilant however and quickly retrieves the film, which unfortunately turns out not to have been entirely damaged. With this incriminating evidence, the two Poles are transported to a Gestapo military camp in the Slovakian town of Prešov.

Of course, “Witold” has a story ready, which he tries to sell to the Germans questioning him. He is a student of architecture, wants to continue his studies in Geneva, and the roll of film with pictures of the ruins of Warsaw was given to him by a schoolmate. The Germans however are not fooled by the tale, given that about two weeks earlier Muszyński had betrayed another guide, whom they then tortured and he revealed information about the route taken by the secret couriers.

The Gestapo uses a specific tactic, alternating between beating “Witold” senseless and making cordial promises of better treatment, if “Herr Courier” will only tell the truth about his underground connections. And “Witold” would have a lot to say...

Following three days of such interrogation, “Witold” comes to the conclusion that he may be unable to endure further torture.

*I knew that I had arrived at the end. That I should never be free again, that I should not survive another beating, and that in order to escape the degradation of betraying my friends while I was half-conscious, the only thing for me to do was to use the razor blade and to take my own life.*

*(Story..., p. 163)(...) I took out the razor and cut into my right wrist. The pain was not great. Obviously, I hadn't hurt the vein. I tried again, this time lower, this time cutting back and forth as hard as I could. Suddenly the blood streamed like a fountain. I knew I had got it this time. Then, clutching the razor in my bleeding right hand, I cut the vein on the left wrist. This time it was easier. I lay on my bed with my arms outstretched at my sides. The blood spurted out evenly, forming pools beside my legs. In a few minutes, I felt I was getting weaker. In a haze, I realized that the blood had stopped flowing and that I was still alive. In fear of being unsuccessful, I flung my arms about to make them bleed again. The blood flowed in thick streams. I felt as though I were suffocating and tried to draw breath through my mouth. I became nauseous, retched, and vomited. Then I lost consciousness. (Story..., p. 164)*

And yet, his attempt is unsuccessful. The guard notices the puddle of blood and doctors save the Polish emissary. A suicide attempt is hard proof that the Gestapo are holding someone of importance. The Germans transport the would-be suicide to Nowy Sącz and place him under strict surveillance at the hospital there. Fortunately, the entire hospital staff is made up of Poles. The doctors and nurses intentionally tell the Germans that the patient is in worse shape than he really is. Through a priest, "Witold" asks to be put in touch with a trusted friend. She is Zofia Rysiówna, the sister of a Polish counterintelligence officer, who is in hiding in Nowy Sącz, while also helping to create a part of the underground transit network.

"Witold" asks "Zosia" to tell the leaders of the underground in Kraków that he's been caught and demand that they supply him with poison. He knows that he may not be able to withstand further interrogation.

The leaders in Kraków consult each other in heated debate. The ultimate decision is made by Tadeusz "Korczak" Komorowski, the commander of the Union for Armed Struggle in Kraków, who will later be known as "Bór," the general and commander of the Home Army. The commander makes the decision instantaneously. "Witold" cannot remain in the hands of the Gestapo. Every effort must be made to free him, but if that is not possible, the poison is to be employed. "Zosia" returns to Nowy Sącz in the company of a trusted officer. She carries two packages. One contains money to bribe the guards. The other contains the poison. Upon reaching Nowy Sącz, the two learn that the head physician at the hospital, Dr. Jan Słowikowski, is "Dzięcioł," a fellow underground conspirator. That greatly simplifies matters, as well as the fact that the prisoner-patient is guarded by Polish, not German, police officers.

The rescue operation is planned out perfectly. That evening, the police officers guarding “Witold,” as well as the other patients in the ward, receive sedatives. “Witold” is simply to walk to a window open above the landing of a staircase and jump from the sill onto the roof of the adjacent lean-to, where a group of armed collaborators is waiting. Together, they run away in the direction of the river Dunajec, where a boat has been hidden. This form of escape across the water helps confuse the canine patrols. By early morning, they reach “Witold’s” temporary hiding place, a shack owned by forester Józef Wideł, another person cooperating with the underground. When “Witold” thanks his saviors, he hears in reply:



Jan Karski – 1943

*Don't be too grateful to us. We had two orders: The first was to do everything in our power to help you escape. The second was to shoot you if we failed. You were lucky... (Story..., p. 190)*

Meanwhile, an all-out manhunt is on in Nowy Sącz. A high price has been placed on “Witold’s” head. He has to remain hidden in the shed, so as not to be seen by any random individuals. Those that had helped in his escape are arrested. Jan Słowikowski and one of the police guards flee from Nowy Sącz and are able to live through the occupation in hiding. Zofia Rysiówna is not so fortunate. She is apprehended in Warsaw, brought back to Nowy Sącz, battered and sent to the camp in Ravensbrück. Numerous people with connections to the Nowy Sącz underground community are shot to death. Several conspirators who had helped “Witold” are sent to Auschwitz, as in the end is the forester Józef Wideł, who was the first one to help. In order to save “Witold’s” life, over a dozen individuals sacrificed theirs.



## REVENGE IN POLAND

By Mr. B, as told to George Creel

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM REUSWIG

(JAN  
KARSKI)  
JK

Mr. B describes exploits that confounded the Gestapo, in his concluding article on Poland's indomitable secret government

II  
WHAT surprises me here in the United States is your high opinion of the Gestapo as a ruthlessly efficient organization, a combination of the F.B.I. and the Canadian Mounted. Believe me, sir, Himmler and his thugs are a very stupid lot. Outside of butchery and sadism, they are without ideas, and I doubt if your Mr. J. Edgar Hoover would give one of them a job. They throw out dragnets, arresting people by the hundreds, they burn villages, hanging and shooting whole populations, they beat and cripple, but when none of it brings them any closer to the underground, their thick skulls can think of nothing except to start the horrible business of mass torture and mass killing all over again.  
Look at the record: Himmler has 60,000

*The first page of the article by George Creel published in the American magazine Collier's in November of 1943, describing the Polish Underground State, in which Jan Karski – on whose account the article is based – figures as “Mr. B”*



Because it is not safe for “Witold” to stay in the shed for too long, the leaders of the underground soon find for him a new hiding place. He receives new identification papers, according to which he is a qualified gardener, and as such, is granted a “post” at the residence of the Sławik family, in the countryside near Kraków. The entire Sławik family is deeply entrenched in the underground movement. The gardener also has an assignment to carry out. He is to devise letters and leaflets, which when translated into German are to spread misinformation among the German populace. In accordance with the plan of the underground authorities, “Witold” is to fully regain strength, while the uproar caused by his escape from the hospital dies down.

After several months, he is allowed to return to Kraków. Here he gets the more challenging task of listening in on British radio broadcasts and editing the news for one of the underground bulletins associated with the Polish Socialist Party.

But a widespread wave of arrests begins in Kraków, in mid-March of 1941. Cells at the notorious Montelupi Prison are filled. Successive victims are tortured and break down; after several months of this, the underground network in almost all of southern Poland is destroyed.

Staying in Kraków would be too risky for “Witold” while there is an arrest warrant out for him. He decides to return to Warsaw. There, he reports to “Prezes” Colonel Jan Rzepecki and is directed to the Bureau of Information and Propaganda. He is to write news reports and summaries – to be read by the leadership of the underground – based on reading the underground press, which within the two years

*Zofia Kossak-Szczucka  
– “Weronika” – the leader  
of the Front for the Rebirth  
of Poland*



of occupation has grown considerably. (By 1941, in Warsaw alone, over 300 illegal publications are being produced annually.) Later, same as in Kraków, he moves to the section for radio monitoring. It is at this time that he takes on the new alias “Karski,” which with time is to become his legal surname.

Also during this time, he meets two individuals who will forever change his life. The first is Roman Knoll, a functionary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before the war, currently in charge of the Government Delegate’s Office International Department. The second, even more influential for Karski, is the well-known Catholic writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (a.k.a. “Ciotka” or “Weronika”). Kossak-Szczucka is the founder of a Catholic organization called Front Odrodzenia Polski (FOP – The Front for the Rebirth of Poland).



It is within this organization that Jan Karski, the product of a Jesuit secondary school, finds his political haven. It is here that he meets other activists who share his way of thinking: Witold Bieńkowski and the young Władysław Bartoszewski, who has just been released from Auschwitz.

FOP is not a purely political organization. Rather, it is an organization concerned with ethics and has as its goal “the moral rebirth of the nation,” or more accurately, the persistent battle against the demoralization and brutalization present in daily life, given the continuously escalating violent nature of the occupation. FOP publishes its own periodical entitled “Polska Żyje” (“Poland Lives”) and is engaged in providing aid to the most needy. This includes members of the Jewish population in particular, who find themselves in a situation which grows more dreadful with each passing day.

It is during this time, just before Jan Karski leaves Warsaw for his last mission, that the process of extermination of the three and a half million of Poland’s Jews is taking place.

Since September 1939, in accordance with the racist ideology of the Nazi regime, the Jewish residents of the German-occupied territories had been subject to ever-tightening restrictions and increasing degradation. However, prior to the summer of 1941, the time of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, there were no actual plans for the complete physical elimination of the European Jews.

The situation changes after fighting starts on the Eastern Front. Within a short time, German “task forces” or *Einsatzgruppen* appear on Nazi-occupied territory, and with no qualms whatsoever begin murdering Jewish citizens *en masse*. In one town after another, sometimes with the help and participation of the local populace, large-scale pogroms are organized. On Polish lands which as the result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact had been occupied by the Soviets, such pogroms took place at Jedwabne and several other neighboring towns. In fall of 1941 begins the systematic eradication of Jews in the District of Galicia. It is to this end that the Germans build a specialized death camp at Belżec.

At the time when the details of the “Final Solution” are being formalized at the infamous Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the process of mass extermination of the Jews on Nazi-occupied lands and within the General Government has already been going on for at least half a year.

News of these atrocities are slow to reach the general Polish populace and even then, it is incomplete, because the Germans do everything so that the true aims of the operation are kept secret, especially from the intended victims themselves. But it is impossible to completely hide the truth about what is taking place at certain locations, as for example in the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest of all Jewish ghettos in Europe, where starvation and disease have taken on epidemic proportions.

Although Zofia Kossak-Szczucka and the other activists of the FOP are engaged in bringing various forms of aid to Jews who are in hiding, they see it as their main objective to appeal to the collective conscience, to call the whole society's attention to the ongoing atrocities. Karski participates in the heated discussions that take place prior to the publication of the famous "Protest" authored by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka.



*(Above) A Jewish father and child in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation.  
(Photos: DNA Poland, Ltd.)*

*Protest: In the Warsaw Ghetto, behind walls that separate it from the outside world, several hundred thousand condemned await death. There is no hope of rescue, no help is coming. (...) The same thing that is going on at the Warsaw Ghetto has been happening in a hundred other cities and towns across Poland. The total number of murdered Jews has already exceeded one million and is growing every day. They are all dying – the rich and the poor, the old, women, men, teenagers and infants. Catholics die with the name of Jesus and Mary on their lips alongside Orthodox Jews. They are all guilty of the crime of having been born into the Jewish Nation, which Hitler has condemned to death.*

*The world is watching these atrocities – more horrible than anything else history has seen – in silence. Millions of defenseless people are being slaughtered amid an ominous and all-encompassing silence. (...) Aside from the dying Jews, there are only Pilates, who wash their hands of everything.*

*This silence cannot be tolerated any longer. No matter what its cause, it is despicable. One cannot allow oneself to be passive in the face of atrocity. Silence in the face of murder makes one the murderer's accomplice. Those that do not condemn the killing are assenting to it. (A fragment of "The Protest")*

"The Protest" was printed in several thousand copies and distributed secretly through the underground network in the first days of August 1942, when the deportation operation in the Warsaw Ghetto was at its peak. From numerous accounts of that time, it is known that this appeal made a great impression. Perhaps it was the force that spurred the creation of the Żegota several weeks later – first a secret committee – and then the secret Council for Aid to Jews, the only such government-sponsored official cell in all of occupied Europe.

At this time, the decision had already been made by the highest officials of the underground to use Karski again as an emissary. This time he was to go to London, the new headquarters of the Polish government-in-exile after the fall of France. The leaders were aware of the great risk. If he were to be caught again, it would indeed be very easy for the Gestapo to determine that "Jan Karski" and "Witold Kucharzewski," whose name figured on the arrest warrant, are one and the same person. And yet, these arguments were outweighed by those in favor of the mission. On all his previous missions, Karski had done an outstanding job. He had not only proved himself to be committed to the cause, and to possess extraordinary talents as a conspirator. He has shown, exceptional courage which had never turned into bravado. But what's most important – as pointed out by the socialist leader "Bazyli" – Karski was a man of unbelievable luck...

The responsibility for the organizational aspect of the trip was taken up by the Home Army's liaison cell. Following numerous arrests, the liaison route that led through the mountains to Hungary had been largely eliminated, so it was decided to take advantage of the fact that many foreign workers were employed at German companies operating in Poland at the time. One such worker, a Frenchman, was successfully persuaded to afford the Polish courier the use of his identification papers. A fee was involved, of course. The Frenchman was also seriously putting himself at risk, and he maintained that the only reason why he is willing to participate in the scheme is because of his hatred of the Germans.

News of Karski's upcoming mission had reached the leaders of the Jewish secret organizations. They knew that Karski is to relay information from party leaders in Poland to the leadership of their mother organizations in London, and had asked Cyryl Ratajski, head of the Government Delegate's Office at Home, to use the courier's services in the same manner as the other political factions. Ratajski agreed, informed Karski of the request made by the Jewish organizations and advised him that he should follow it.

Years later, in 1986, this is how Jan Karski related those events to me:

*Naturally, I agreed. (...) The meeting took place at dusk, inside a half-ruined building in a Warsaw suburb. I was met by two people, the leader of the Bund and the leader of the Zionists. Both introduced themselves by their aliases.*

(Following the war, it was determined that the Bund's representative was Leon Feiner. As for the other Jewish leader, it is not known whether he was Adolf Berman or Menachem Kirschenbaum.)

*In the course of this and the following conversations, I learned things which were horrifying. Both men were in the deepest state of despair. They were well aware of the fact that the deportations that had begun in the summer of that year from the Warsaw Ghetto and from other ghettos across Poland signified the end of the entire Jewish Nation. They knew that Jews were being transported to extermination camps. Both stressed that if the Allies do not take dramatic and unprecedented measures, the Jewish Nation will cease in its existence. I remember the words of the Bund representative: "You other Poles are suffering too and many of you will die. But after the war, Poland will be resurrected and your wounds will slowly heal. But by then, the Polish Jews will be no more. Hitler will lose this war, but he will win the war he has declared on the Jews."*



*Adolf Berman – “Borowski”  
Leader of “Poalei Syjon”  
and one of the founders of “Zegota”*



*Leon “Mikolaj” Feiner of the Bund  
– one of the founders of the Council  
for Aid to Jews – whose message Karski  
carried to the West*

During this and the subsequent meetings, the Jewish leaders, who were aware that Karski is to meet not only with Polish governmental representatives, but also with representatives of the Allies, presented him with a list of measures which should be taken by the Allies, in order to save the remnants of the Polish Jewry.

They were as follows:

1. Officially declare that one of the Allies' war aims is the prevention of the further extermination of the Jews.
2. Inform the German people, by means of the radio, leaflets and other media, about the atrocities being committed on the Jewish people by the German government. Publicize the names of the German officials and commanders taking part in the extermination effort, in addition to information about the methods used for extermination and other pertinent facts.

3. Officially and publicly call on the German people to put pressure on their government, in order to stop the extermination.

4. If no such pressure is exerted, put the burden of responsibility for the atrocities on the German people as a whole.

5. Officially and publicly announce that unless the extermination is stopped, Allied forces will take extraordinary and unprecedented steps, namely:

a. Selected targets in Germany will be bombarded. The German people will be informed that these attacks are in retaliation for the crimes committed on the Jews;

b. German prisoners of war, having been informed of the atrocities committed by their Nazi government, and still pledging allegiance to it, shall be held responsible for those crimes.

Karski was of course aware that realizing some of these demands would be absolutely out of the question. No government of a democratic country would make prisoners of war responsible for the actions of their leaders. This is what he tried to explain to his interlocutors.

*They answered in unison:*

*“Please understand. We are desperate. We are dying. These are the only measures we can think of which will put an end to the extermination. Tell them that, given our situation, we cannot afford to make demands which are realistic. We don’t know what is realistic, or not realistic. We are dying here! Say it!”*

The two Jewish leaders also presented Karski with other demands and appeals, which he was to deliver to Dr. Ignacy Schwarzbart and Szmul Zygielbojm, the two Jewish representatives of the National Council within the Polish government-in-exile, which functioned as the Polish parliament. There were other demands addressed to Prime Minister Commander-in-Chief Władysław Sikorski, as well as the president of the Polish Republic, Władysław Raczkiewicz. The Jewish activists made an exclusive appeal to President Raczkiewicz to forward their pleas to Pope Pius XII.

The entreaties made by the Jewish leaders in Warsaw to the commander-in-chief were of a particular nature. Karski learned from the two men that preparations are being made for an armed uprising in the Ghetto. The Jewish fighters had previously asked the leaders of the Home Army to supply them with arms.

Their request was denied. Now they directed that same request straight to the commander-in-chief.

*“I cannot pass on this information behind the back of the commander of the Home Army, who is my superior,” I said upon hearing them out, “unless you authorize me to contact him directly, so that I may present your grievances and ask for his explanation.”*

*They both agreed without hesitation.*

Karski’s subsequent course of action is the best testament to his determination of fulfilling all the requests of his Jewish interlocutors. In any army of the world, the request of an ordinary lieutenant to meet with the head general, even if the former is about to set off on a special mission, would be viewed as something extraordinary, to say the least. In the context of a secret, underground army, such an arrangement would seem even more unlikely. And yet, Karski manages to accomplish his aim, being granted permission to meet with General “Grot” personally. During the meeting, the Home Army commander acknowledges that although he has provided the Jewish organizations with some weapons, he is unable to support them with any more, because, first of all, his own army is lacking in munitions, so that he has to tell his own soldiers to procure their own weapons, and second, the Home Army has clearly defined goals. Aside from the current fighting, the chief objective is to stock up on weaponry and manpower to be used in a future uprising. He is a soldier and has to think in terms of military strategy. In his view, an armed insurgency inside the Ghetto will have no military significance, and, as he puts it, “will be quelled in the course of several hours.” Naturally, if the commander-in-chief sends him a clear order pertaining to this matter, he will obey.

Of course, it is now known that General “Grot” was grossly mistaken. The uprising inside of the Warsaw Ghetto lasted a whole month.

His intervention on behalf of the Jews by meeting with the general was not the only “private initiative” taken by Karski while he was preparing for this mission. Without any hesitation, and despite the great risk, he agreed to witness the extermination of the Jews with his own eyes, both in the Warsaw Ghetto and at one of the camps in the east of Poland.

“Entering the Ghetto was relatively easy,” recalls Karski and continues: *We did it through the cellar of one of the houses adjoining the wall of the Ghetto. For several days, I did not shave, so that I could more easily blend in with the crowd on the other side of that wall. My guides had also given me clear instructions as to my attire. The things I saw while I was in there were horrifying.*

*I saw not only squalor and starvation, but I was witness to a “hunt” – boys from the Hitler Youth were shooting at fleeing, panicking people. The scenes I had witnessed I shall never forget. For many years after the war, it was as if I still had them before my eyes.*

Karski was present inside the Ghetto on two occasions. During his second secret visit, his guide was Irena “Jolanta” Sendler, an activist from the Provisional Committee for Aid to Jews, formed on September 27<sup>th</sup>, which in December of 1942 became Żegota – The Council for Aid to Jews, and subsequently saved the lives of over 2 500 Jewish children.

Of course, for the sake of safety, Karski and Sendler knew nothing about each other at that time. Years later, they both became honorary citizens of Israel. Much more difficult and even more harrowing than his visit to the Ghetto was Karski’s experience in the east of Poland, where he spent time at one of the death camps:

*It was mid-October. The guide took me to a small-town hardware store. After several hours, this man arrived, who spoke excellent Polish. He was very matter-of-fact and had procured for me the uniform of an Estonian guard.*



*By that time, I already knew that in all the extermination camps the Germans did not use Poles as guards. Extermination was to be held in secret. I received the following instructions: “You are going to follow me. You will not speak to anyone. You know neither Polish nor German. I am going to escort you into the camp, but once there, you will be on your own.”*

*Jan Karski  
(wearing the light-colored coat)  
with friends in Melbourne,  
November 1993  
– on his left is “Dudek”  
from the Bund, Karski’s guide  
in 1942 during the visit  
to the Warsaw Ghetto*





Deutsche  
Reichsbahn

Reichsbahn

*(Story..., p. 344) It was a large, flat plain and occupied about a square mile. It was surrounded on all sides by a formidable barbed-wire fence, nearly two yards in height and in good repair. Inside the fence, at intervals of about fifteen yards, guards were standing, holding rifles with fixed bayonets ready for use. Around the outside of the fence militia men circulated on constant patrol. The camp itself contained a few small sheds or barracks. The rest of the area was completely covered by a dense, pulsating, throbbing, noisy human mass. Starved, stinking, gesticulating, insane human beings in constant agitated motion. Through them, forcing paths if necessary with their rifle butts, walked the German police and the militia men.*

*(...) To my left I noticed the railroad tracks which passed about a hundred yards from the camp. From the camp to the track a sort of raised passage had been built from old boards. On the track a dusty freight train waited, motionless. (...) (Story..., p. 345)*

*The Jewish mass vibrated, trembled, and moved to and fro as if united in a single, insane, rhythmic trance. They waved their hands, shouted, quarreled, cursed, and spat at each other. Hunger, thirst, fear, and exhaustion had driven them all insane. I had been told that they were usually left in the camp for three or four days without a drop of water or food. (...) (Story..., p. 345) None of them could possibly help or share with each other and they soon lost any self-control or any sense whatsoever except the barest instinct of self-preservation. (...) It was, moreover, typical autumn weather, cold, raw, and rainy. The sheds could not accommodate more than two to three thousand people and every 'batch' included more than five thousand. This meant that there were always two to three thousand men, women, and children scattered about in the open, suffering exposure as well as everything else. (...) (Story..., p. 346)*

*I remained there perhaps half an hour, watching this spectacle of human misery. (...) Finally I noticed a change in the motion of the guards. They walked less and they all seemed to be glancing in the same direction – at the passage to the track which was quite close to me. (...)*

*Two German policemen came to the gate with a tall, bulky, SS man. He barked out an order and they began to open the gate with some difficulty. It was very heavy. He shouted at them impatiently. They worked at it frantically and finally whipped it open. They dashed down the passage as though they were afraid the SS men might come after them and took up their positions where the passage ended. The whole system had been worked out with crude effectiveness. The outlet of the passage was blocked off by two cars of the freight train, so that any attempt on the part of one of the Jews to break out of the mob, or to escape if they had had so much presence of mind left, would have been completely impossible. Moreover, it facilitated the job of loading them onto the trains.*

*The SS man turned to the crowd, planted himself with his feet wide apart and his hands on his hips and loosed a roar that must have actually hurt his ribs. It could be heard far above the hellish babble that came from the crowd. (Story..., p. 347) 'Ruhe, ruhe! Quiet, quiet! All Jews will board this train to be taken to a place where work awaits them. Keep order. Do not push. Anyone who attempts to resist or create panic will be shot.' (...) And now came the most horrible episode of them all. The Bund leader had warned me that if I lived to be a hundred I would never forget some of the things I saw. He did not exaggerate.*

*The military rule stipulates that a freight car may carry eight horses or forty soldiers. Without any baggage at all, a maximum of a hundred passengers standing close together and pressing against each other could be crowded into a car. The Germans had simply issued orders to the effect that 120 to 130 Jews had to enter each car. (Story..., p. 348) These orders were now being carried out. Alternately swinging and firing with their rifles, the policemen were forcing still more people into the two cars which were already over-full. The shots continued to ring out in the rear and the driven mob surged forward, exerting an irresistible pressure against those nearest the train. These unfortunates, crazed by what they had been through, scourged by the policemen, and shoved forward by the milling mob, then began to climb on the heads and shoulders of those in the trains. These were helpless since they had the weight of the entire advancing throng against them and responded only with howls of anguish to those who, clutching at their hair and clothes for support, trampling on necks, faces and shoulders, breaking bones and shouting with insensate fury, attempted to clamber over them. (...) Then the policemen slammed the doors across the hastily withdrawn limbs that still protruded and pushed the iron bars in place.*

*(...) Nor was this all. I know that many people will not believe me, will not be able to believe me, will think I exaggerate or invent. But I saw it and it is not exaggerated or invented. I have no other proofs, no photographs. All I can say is that I saw it and that it is the truth.*

*The floors of the car had been covered with a thick, white powder. It was quicklime. Quicklime is simply unslaked lime or calcium oxide that has been dehydrated. Anyone who has seen cement being mixed knows what occurs when water is poured on lime. The mixture bubbles and steams as the powder combines with the water, generating a large amount of heat.*

*Here the lime served a double purpose in the Nazi economy of brutality. The moist flesh coming in contact with the lime is rapidly dehydrated and burned.*

*The occupants of the cars would be literally burned to death before long, the flesh eaten from their bones. Thus the Jews would 'die in agony,' fulfilling the promise Himmler had issued 'in accord with the will of the Fuehrer,' in Warsaw, in 1942. Secondly, the lime would prevent decomposing bodies from spreading disease. It was efficient and inexpensive – a perfectly chosen agent for their purposes.*

When nearly half a century following these events I talked with Jan Karski, he told me: *I spent about an hour in that camp. I came out sick, seized by fits of nausea. I vomited blood. I had seen horrifying things there. Disbelief? You would not believe it yourself, if you saw it. Even today – and it's been over 40 years – I can't wipe out these scenes from my memory.*

While describing to me what he saw in the autumn of 1942, Jan Karski was convinced that he had been at the Belżec death camp.



*Civilization 1942 Arnold Hoffman's illustration for the front page of the December 3rd 1944 issue of The New York Times Book review, based on Jan Karski's account/*



That is what he wrote in his memoir, *Story of a Secret State*, how he recounted it to me in the autumn of 1986, and also what he told his biographer, Stanisław M. Jankowski. This was the version of the story included in numerous historical studies. Several years after our conversation, following the political changes that took place in Poland, Jan Karski could – for the first time since 1942 – pay a visit to his native country. Meanwhile, over the course of half a century, Polish historians had been able to gain a lot of insight into the Holocaust. Numerous details of Jan Karski’s story did not match up with what was already known. Bełżec was the final destination, where the victims’ bodies were cremated in ovens. Karski, on the other hand, had described how they were being crowded into freight cars. This discrepancy was cleared up in the mid-1990s, when Karski visited Bełżec, as well as a small town by the name of Izbica Lubelska. It turned out to be the town he had visited in the fall of 1942. It was there, 65 km east of Lublin, by the Lublin – Zamość rail line, that the Germans had set up a “transit camp” as part of Operation Reinhardt. Here, Jews were brought by train from the District of Galicia and later also from Slovakia, and then sent on another train to the Bełżec death camp. On that fateful day, Karski had been witness to such a train-loading operation.

The visit to Izbica Lubelska was Karski’s last self-imposed assignment in Poland, done out of his own sense of duty and without the knowledge or consent of his superiors. The documents that had been prepared in Warsaw for him to take to London were in the form of microfilm and included the *Report on the Situation of the Jews in Poland*, created by the Bureau of Information and Propaganda, as well as a private letter written by the Jewish leaders and addressed to Szmul Zygelbojm. The microfilm was hidden inside the soldered shaft of a key. The instructions on how to extract the precious contents have been preserved until this day: “Make three equidistant grooves, starting from the middle. Break carefully. Do not cut through. Casing is 1 – 1.5 mm thick.”

The train journey to Berlin and then on to Paris passed without an incident. The alleged French worker feigned a toothache in order to discourage other passengers from talking to him. In Paris he gave the key with the microfilm to the chief of a Polish intelligence unit. He then made his way for the Spanish border. It took several days to cross the Pyrenees in the snow. This was no novelty to Karski, now a seasoned mountaineer. When he finally reached neutral Spain, he was received by American intelligence officers and with their help reached the port city of Algeciras. There, a British ship was already waiting to take him to Gibraltar. In mid-November 1942, the emissary from Warsaw reported to the Polish authorities in London.

He was proud of his feat. He had broken a record. The journey from Warsaw to London lasted only 21 days.

The fact of Karski's arrival in London was initially kept secret. According to the plan, he was to return to Poland within a short time. He was immediately received by the highest officials of the Polish government, including General Sikorski. His first meeting with the general, who was to leave London the following day, was very short. Officially, Sikorski was departing on a "military inspection," but in reality, he was headed to Washington for talks with President Roosevelt. He informed Karski that for his efforts during the war, he will be decorated with the Virtuti Militari Order, the highest military honor awarded in the Republic of Poland. Following the general's instructions, Karski is to compose a detailed report. In the following days, most of his time is spent on dictating the report to a typist. The "Karski Report" still serves as one of the most important documents on the occupation of Poland during World War II. In the course of the following month or two, Karski undergoes numerous medical procedures to repair the skin on his wrists, scarred from his failed suicide attempt, and to reconstruct his teeth, knocked out during the interrogation at Prešov. He then begins to meet with political party leaders. Yet, he is still not given the opportunity to carry out the part of his mission that he considers to be the most important. He wants to inform Jewish leaders and Allied authorities about the ongoing extermination of the Jews.

L.dz.K. 4672/42.  
Nr. 114

Londyn, dnia 1 grudnia 1942.

B.PILNA

Delegat

Jeśli Walek i Leszek nie wyjechali, zatrzymać ich do dalszej instrukcji, która będzie dotyczyć trasy. Karski przybył w dobrej formie.

STEM.

*One of the many reports about Jan Karski – "Witold" – this one stating that he arrived in London in good shape*

He has an opportunity to complain to Sikorski himself, who having returned from his visit to the United States, invites the young lieutenant to his house for dinner. Sikorski is incensed. Unbeknownst to Karski, the report he had carried inside of the key from Warsaw to Paris reached London while he was making his way through the Pyrenees, and has already been put into effect. On the basis of this report, as well as other information, which Karski had presented himself, an extensive memo was composed, addressed to governments of the Allied Forces. In it, Minister of Foreign Affairs Edward Raczynski writes in the name of the Polish government:

*The latest reports provide a horrifying picture of the current situation of the Polish Jews. New methods of mass slaughter, which have been in use for the last several months, are a testament to the fact that the German authorities have as their goal the complete obliteration of the Jewish population in Poland, and in Western and Central Europe, as well as in the German Reich itself, and are systematically going about achieving this goal.*

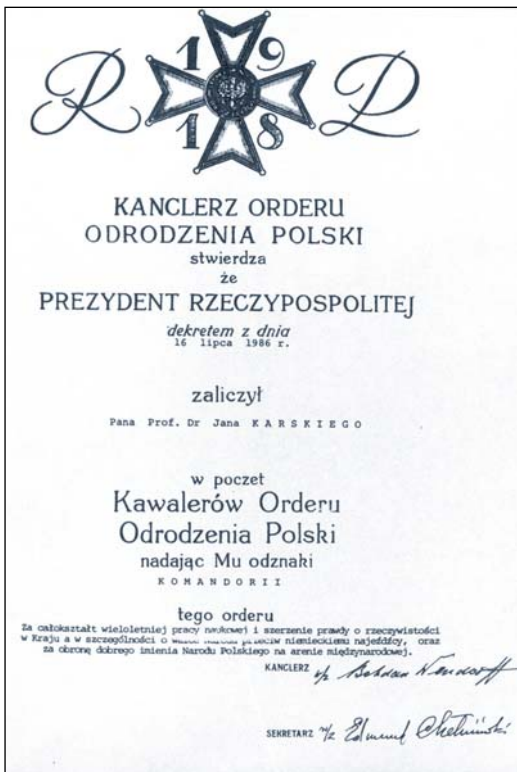
*The Government of Poland sees it as its responsibility to provide all civilized nations with the following, completely verified information, which illustrates, all too clearly, the new methods of extermination being employed by the German authorities.*

The subsequent section of the memo thoroughly describes the ongoing atrocities and ends in the following manner:

*As the governing body of Poland, the country in which the Germans have begun the systematic extermination of Polish citizens and citizens of Jewish background from many other European countries, we see it as our responsibility to turn to the United Nations, who we trust will share our opinion*

Nazwisko	KARSKI
Imię	Jan
Pseudonim	
Przydział	Emisariusz Rządu do kraju i kraju do Rządu.
Odnznaczony został	
<b>KRZYŻEM ARMII KRAJOWEJ</b>	
ustanowionym dnia 1 sierpnia 1966 roku przez dowódcę A.K. gen. Tadeusza Bora- Komorowskiego dla upamiętnienia wysiłku żołnierza Polski Podziemnej w latach 1939-1945.	
Podpis:	<i>T. Raczynski</i>
	T. Raczynski - "Grzegorz"
	Z-CADA-CY ARMII KRAJOWEJ
London, dnia	24.7.1970

*The document certifying Jan Karski's decoration with the Home Army Cross*



*In 1986, Professor Jan Karski is awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta [Poland Reborn]*

*as to the necessity of not only condemning the crimes being committed by the Nazis and of punishing those responsible, but also of finding effective ways which are likely to stop the Nazis from continuing to employ their methods of mass extermination.*

The memo was sent on December the 12<sup>th</sup>. Four days later, Minister Edward Raczynski spoke on the radio to the Polish nation about the tragedy that has befallen the Jewish people.

There was also a response to the appeal made by Jewish organizations to send more weapons to be used by the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. A telegram dated December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1942, addressed to the Home Army commander, inquired whether it was true that “Berezowski’s” (or Leon Feiner’s) request for

arms had been denied. Possibly as the result of this communication, at the end of January 1943, the Home Army supplied the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) with 50 guns and ammunition, 80 kg (ca. 180 lbs) of supplies for the making of petrol bombs, and 59 hand grenades. More weapons, albeit still in modest quantities, were delivered in subsequent months.

Additionally, on the day following his meeting with Karski, President Władysław Raczkiewicz sent a letter to Pope Pius XII, imploring: “At Your feet, Holy Father, I beg for Your intervention...”

From January 1943 Karski is officially employed at the Office of the Prime Minister. Now that news of his stay in London are official, he is allowed to meet not only with Polish political leaders, but also with representatives of Allied governments, the press, and other people of influence.



He prepares for this task as thoroughly as for his other assignments. He knows that the meetings will be short and that in the course of 15 – 20 minutes he will need to be able to talk about the Polish Underground State and its organization, about the fighting, the terror and the death camps. He memorizes his speeches and is given pointers by the prime minister's trusted advisor, Hieronim Rettinger, who is highly knowledgeable about the ways of the British and about their culture. Karski first speaks to ambassadors accredited to the Polish government. Based on these first meetings, he can already see that the demands and proposals put forth by the Jewish leaders will be extremely difficult to carry out.

Gradually, more and more officials are interested in hearing about his experiences. He is invited to meet with Sir Anthony Eden, Britain's foreign minister and Churchill's most important wartime advisor. Recounting the details of the meeting with the British statesman years later, Karski remembered him as a generally friendly and kind listener, who did not interrupt, until Karski began on the subject of extermination. "I am familiar with your report," he cut Karski off. "Things will proceed as they were meant to proceed."

Eden is highly interested in the details of the underground and the political situation in Poland. This is the time of the Siege of Stalingrad, a turning point in World War II history. He invites Karski for another meeting. Lord Selbourne the chief of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the British organization responsible for espionage and sabotage in the occupied countries, is also present at this meeting. In the middle of it, Eden quite unexpectedly turns to the subject of the extermination of the Jews:

*Out of the blue, he asked whether the Polish underground cooperates with the Jewish underground and whether the Poles are helping the Jews. I answered that I am not fully knowledgeable in this area, but that my own mission is an example of such collaboration. I said that when I was leaving Warsaw, a special organization was just being created and was to be operated through the Government Delegate's Office at Home, with the sole purpose of saving and helping the Jews.*

(This was Żegota – the Provisional Committee for Aid to Jews, created on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942, which later became the Council for Aid to Jews, part of the Government Delegate's Office at Home.)

The same topic is addressed in the greater context of the war by Lord Selbourne during Karski's meeting with him.

The Chief of Special Operations does not hide the fact that the demands of the Jewish leaders cannot be met.

This is how Karski remembered his argumentation:

*You will need to explain to them that bombing targets in Germany in retaliation for the German persecution of the Jews may have a negative effect on our pilots. In every air strike, we suffer losses. The pilots risk their lives for victory, to be able to liberate oppressed nations, not only the Jews. Why not, someone might ask, bomb Germany to save the Russians, the French or the Belgians? As for transfers of gold or hard currency to save or buy out the Jews, such operations can, of course, be concealed during wartime. But once the war is over, the public will learn that the British government made it possible for the Nazis to buy armaments from the neutral states. It's better not to think what the reaction would be then.*

The British officials Karski encounters suggest to him that he should target the general public in spreading the news about occupied Poland. And so begins Karski's series of lectures and readings. This is how one such meeting was described by Maria Kuncewiczowa:

*He was young, tall, dark, and dressed so well that his suit and tie were hardly noticeable. With a sheet of paper in his hand, he was seated on the chair in a light, albeit constricted manner, as if he did not want to take up too much of the space or anyone's attention. In this man's words, there was no superficiality, only logic, equally horrifying to the free world, as to the conquered world it was natural.*

This fact was especially apparent while Karski was describing how the Poles listened in on the news coming from foreign radio stations. Being caught listening to the radio in Poland at that time meant an on-the-spot execution. And yet, people did listen, because they wanted to know the truth. But the truth originated predominantly from the neutral countries. "From London," said Karski "we get Optimism, Encouragement and Reassurance... That is not what we need and it is not worth dying for..."

Prominent Polish poet Antoni Słonimski wrote that Karski looked "as a rebel in the 1863 Polish insurrection against Russia – as though he had just stepped out of an Artur Grottger painting."

In the course of several weeks, in spite of himself and despite the initial plans of the Polish authorities, Karski had become – as we today would say – a media star. He met journalists, political leaders and other prominent personalities such as H. G. Wells and Arthur Koestler. Because there were still plans for "Witold" to return back to Poland, it is Koestler who lends his voice and passes off as Karski in the BBC radio special during which the story of an anonymous emissary from Poland is told in first person. "The point was," Karski was to tell me later, "to keep my voice from being heard and recognized." And according to Lord Selbourne, Koestler's English pronunciation was as bad as Karski's!

Despite the obvious air of detachment exhibited by the British leaders relative to the plight of the Jews, Karski does not give up his attempts to rouse the collective conscience. Together with Aleksey Tolstoy and Thomas Mann, he writes a pamphlet entitled “Terror in Europe: The Fate of the Jews.” Printed in many thousands of copies, it comes out right after the remnants of the last insurgent bunkers in the Warsaw Ghetto go up in smoke.

It is also after the British and American Bermuda Conference, at which it is officially declared that any sort of aid to the Jews of occupied Europe is beyond the means of the Allies.



*Jan Karski in 1943  
on his first mission to  
the United States*

On the morning of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Jan Karski was awakened by a telephone call. One of the Polish government workers was calling to tell him that Szmul Zygelbojm had committed suicide the previous day. Zygelbojm had left a letter addressed to President Raczkiwicz and Prime Minister Sikorski, with the following words:

*Szmul Zygielbojm, one of the  
Jewish representatives within the  
Polish National Council  
in London*



*The responsibility for the crime of murdering the whole Jewish population of Poland rests in the first place upon the murderers themselves but indirectly it rests also upon all humanity, the governments and peoples of the Allied States which have not yet undertaken any concrete action to stop this crime. Bypassively watching the extermination of millions of defenseless children, women and men being tortured to death, those countries become accomplices of the murderers.*

Szmul Zygelbojm’s death shook Jan Karski personally. When we met in Washington in 1986, he still found it difficult to talk about. The first time he met Zygelbojm, it was just weeks before his death, and in the course of that meeting, he uttered the words that were soon to haunt him for the rest of his life.

It was late January or early February of 1943, and Karski had already attended a series of meetings with the British leaders. He and Zygelbojm met in the building which housed the Polish Ministry of the Interior. The conversation that ensued between them was not easy. The Bund leader seemed bitter and agitated. Karski presented his report, and began to say that the directives he had obtained from the Jewish leaders in Poland are impossible to carry out, for both political and strategic reasons.

*Zygelbojm rose abruptly and advanced a step or two toward me. His eyes snapped with anger and contempt. (...) 'Listen,' he almost shouted. 'I did not come here to talk to you about what is happening here. (...) I know that myself. I came to you to hear about what is happening there, what they want there, what they say there!'*

*I answered with brutal simplicity and directness. 'Very well, then. This is what they told me to say: "Let them go to all the important English and American offices and agencies. Tell them not to leave until they have obtained guarantees that a way has been decided upon to save the Jews. Let them accept no food or drink, let them die a slow death while the world looks on. Let them die. This may shake the conscience of the world."' (Story..., p. 336)*

Thoughts of this very conversation came back when he received news of the Jewish leader's suicide.

*I hung up.*

*At first I felt nothing at all, then a wave of mingled shock, grief, and guilt. I felt as though I had personally handed Zygelbojm his death warrant, even though I had been only the instrument. Painfully, it occurred to me that he might have found my answer to his last question cold and unsympathetic. I had become, I thought to myself, so cynical, so quick and harsh in my judgment, that I could no longer estimate the degree of self-sacrifice possible to a man like Zygelbojm. For days afterwards I felt all my confidence in myself and in my work vanishing and I deliberately forced myself to work twice as hard in order to avoid these intolerable reflections. (Story..., p. 338)*

Karski's sound completion of his mission to London inspired the Polish authorities to send him on another one: this time to the United States.

The spring of 1943 marked a turning point for Poland and Polish politics in World War II. In April, mass graves of Polish officers, prisoners of war captured by Soviet forces and then executed, were discovered in the forest near Katyń.

*This passport is valid for*  
**PASZPORT DYPLMATYCZNY** *travel via South Africa* **PASSEPORT DIPLOMATIQUE**

*London, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945*

*For the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs*

W IMIENI SPRAW ZAGRANICZNYCH  
RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ

*M. Babiniski* AU NOM DE LA  
W. Babiniski. RÉPUBLIQUE POLONAISE

Wszystkim, komu o tym wiedzieć należy, wiado-  
czynimy, iż

Pan *Jan Karski*  
*Kurier Dyplomatyczny*

urodzony w m. *Lgiers*  
dnia *22 marca 1912*

udaje się za granicę

A tous ceux qui ces présentes verront faisons savoir  
que

M *Jan Karski*  
*Courrier Diplomatique*

né à *Lgiers*  
le *22 mars 1912*

se rend à l'étranger

Wobec czego polecamy wszystkim władzom pol-  
skim-cywilnym i wojskowym oraz prosimy odpo-  
wiednie władze zagraniczne aby pozwoliły mu  
swobodnie przejechać i udzieliły pomocy i opieki w  
razie potrzeby.

Paszport niniejszy ważny jest do *31 maja 1944*  
*Londyn, dnia 4 maja 1945*

za Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych

En raison d'  
civiles et militaires polonaises et prions les autorités  
étrangères de vouloir bien le laisser librement  
passer et de lui accorder aide et protection en cas de  
besoin.

Passeport valable jusqu'au *31 mai 1944*  
*Londres le 4 mai 1945*

pour Le Ministre des Affaires Étrangères



*M. Babiniski*  
W. Babiniski.



Podpis paszportu  
Signature du porteur


*Jan Karski*

N° *1718 L. 1218*

The diplomatic passport issued to Karski prior to his mission to the United States, used to conceal his true identity by showing false information about his place of birth and birth date

Once the Polish government turned to the International Red Cross requesting a commission to investigate the murders, Stalin severed diplomatic relations with Poland. The murders did not stir up resentment among the Allied Powers towards the Soviet Union, as the Polish officials had expected. Quite the opposite, Poland suddenly faced accusations of trying to weaken Allied unity. Following the victory at Stalingrad, the Soviet Union was the object of nearly everyone's praise and admiration. In fact, there were voices suggesting that once the war is over, there should be no need to reconstruct the political entities situated in between the victorious USSR and the defeated Germany as independent states. Sikorski hoped that Karski's first-hand account would serve to remind the Allies of the fighting and loss of life in Poland, and perhaps also encourage the Allies to help Poland in reestablishing diplomatic ties with Moscow.

Karski's last meeting with Sikorski took place late in May. The Polish commander-in-chief did not have much time to spare. He was going to the Middle East to inspect General Anders's Army, which following the Nazi defeat in Africa was to be used in the invasion of Italy.

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<p>G. M. S. NR. HK/ZO</p>		<p><u>PRZYCHODZĄCY</u></p>	
<p>TELEGRAM SZYFROWY</p>			
<p>POLMISSION - WASHINGTON</p>			
<p>DO MINISTERSTWA SPRAW ZAGRANICZNYCH</p>			
		<p>WYSŁANO DN. 29. 7. 19</p>	
		<p>OTRZYMANO DN. 29. 7. 19</p>	<p>43</p>
<p>NR. 397</p>			
<p><u>SEKRETOWANY</u></p>			
<p>Dla Pana Ministra i dla Pana Premjera</p>			
<p>1 o Dzisiaj byłem z Karskim u Prezydenta. Rozmowa bardzo przyjazna i ożywiona, niekiedy wartościowa dla sprawy trwała blisko półtorej godziny. Szczegółowy raportem.</p>			
<p>CIECHANOWSKI</p>			

*A coded telegram to Ambassador Jan Ciechanowski with information about Jan Karski's meeting with the American president Franklin D. Roosevelt*

MINISTERSTWO  
SPRAW ZAGRANICZNYCH

*ao Tom*

Londyn, dn.9 czerwca,1943r.

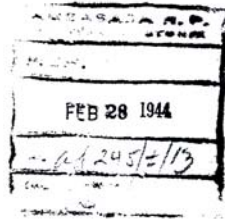
Kochany Janiu,

Polecam Twojej pilnej uwadze a także serdecznej opiece p.Jana Karskiego który jedzie do Was z Polski w drodze na Wielką Brytanię. Jego znajomość spraw polskich jest pierwszorzędna. Wyróżnia się przytym doskonałą pamięcią i wielką ścisłością. Nie mam wątpliwości, że będziesz wiedział jak w sposób najwłaściwszy i najowocniejszy wykorzystasz jego wizytę w Stanach i skontaktować z ludźmi na których nam zależy.

*Janowi mój przyjacielowi*

*Edw. Raczyński*

JWPan Jan Ciechanowski,  
Ambasador R.P.  
w Waszyngtonie.



*Recommendation letter for Jan Karski written by Minister of Foreign Affairs Edward Raczyński to Jan Ciechanowski, Polish Ambassador to the United States, in June of 1943*

Neither Karski nor Sikorski knew that this would be their last meeting. Sikorski died on July 4<sup>th</sup>. His plane crashed into the sea off of Gibraltar shortly after takeoff...



The Polish emissary's journey to the United States was well organized. He was traveling on a Polish diplomatic passport which identified him as Jan Karski.

"And that's how I got my current last name," he told me in Washington.

*After the war, when I was applying for American citizenship, these false documents were the only ones I had. After I explained everything to the American authorities, they concluded that Karski is easier to pronounce than Kozielski. And so, Karski it was.*

In London, members of the Polish government-in-exile did everything to make sure the Polish emissary's mission proceeded smoothly. Deputy Prime Minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk wrote to Jan Ciechanowski, the Polish ambassador in Washington:



*Jan Ciechanowski,  
longtime Polish ambassador  
to the United States*

*The bearer of this letter arrives in the United States at the order of the Prime Minister and myself, to meet with American leaders and leaders of the Polish community. As a living witness, he is to present the story of the struggles, suffering, and the war effort of the Polish nation. As an active member of the Polish underground movement and its first-hand witness, given his exceptional intelligence, excellent memory and ability to recall events with great accuracy and objectivity, Mr. Jan Karski deserves to have your full confidence. He can also provide you with vast amounts of factual information, which he has obtained either through his personal experience or through his work at the headquarters of the Polish Underground.*

Minister of Foreign Affairs Edward Raczynski had also written a somewhat less formal and more personal letter to Jan Ciechanowski.

The ambassador received Karski with great warmth and kindness, as if the visitor from Poland were his own son.

Again, same as in London, this is the beginning of a long series of meetings for Karski. First on the agenda are meetings with Church officials. Karski is taken aback by the fact that none of the spiritual leaders were interested in the fate of the Jews. He then meets with politicians such as Secretary of State Cordell Hull, as well as the United States secretary of war, and the attorney general.



The first of these meetings make a huge impression on the young lieutenant from Poland, but with time his perception of them changes. It becomes clear to him that all the compliments addressed to him, as well as the reassurances of America's great sympathy for Poland are simply casual remarks. With American forces engaged in heavy fighting on the Pacific, the United States officials are not particularly interested in the current situation in Europe, and if they are, it is mainly in the events on the Eastern Front. Major General Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (the United States intelligence agency at the time), mainly wants to know about Karski's passage through Spain, since that part of the journey had been secured by his men.

Karski remembers very well the duties to which he had committed himself in Warsaw, and he reminds himself constantly of the tragic death of Szmul Zygelbojm. He asks the Polish ambassador to arrange a meeting with the chief leaders of the American Jewish community.

First, he talks to Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, a close friend of President Roosevelt.

*I understood that this man would hear me out. So I told him about everything that I have seen with my own eyes, and what I know from the reports, personal accounts and interviews, everything about the situation of the Jews. I am telling him about the demands of the Jewish leaders, my impressions of the Ghetto and of Belżec. He interrupts me from time to time. He's listening and simply wants to know the technical details.*

*I have finished talking; Frankfurter gets up and starts to pace around the room in silence. After a while, he sits back down. He turns to me:*

*"Mr. Karski," he says emphatically, "A man like me talking to a man like you must be totally frank. So I must say: I am unable to believe in what I have just heard, in all the things that you have just told me."* (Karski's account, as recorded by Stanisław M. Jankowski in December of 1987)



*United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who met with Jan Karski to hear his report about the Holocaust*

It is true that America was at war and was suffering great losses, but she had never experienced occupation by a foreign power. For the vast majority of people, the events taking place in occupied Europe were simply incomprehensible, despite the fact that fairly detailed news about the extermination of the Jews had reached the United States prior to Karski's arrival there.

One of Karski's subsequent meetings was with Rabbi Stephen Wise, then president of the Jewish World Congress. Wise had even written an extensive memorandum to President Roosevelt, and yet, here same as in Britain, the position of both the civil and the military authorities was made clear: "we are not going to engage in any operations that could in any way interfere with the war effort." Nahum Goldmann, with whom Karski met next, years later was to state that the American Jewish community, sensing the moods in Washington, refrained from more urgently demanding aid for the dying Jews of Europe "so as not to interfere, by staging loud protests, with the war effort of the free world against Hitlerism."

After war, it was revealed that Karski's efforts to persuade the American Jewish community leaders to help the Jews dying in occupied Poland had not all been in vain. Jewish organizations working through the Polish Government Delegate's Office marked an increase in the amount of monetary aid they were receiving. At this time, following the extermination operations of 1942, this money was mainly used to help those in hiding and to support the activities of the Żegota.

Still in Washington, Karski finally receives the telephone invitation he had been waiting for most earnestly. He is invited to the Oval Office. In the first words of his thoroughly prepared and rehearsed narrative, he states that as he was leaving Warsaw, no one believed that he would be able to fulfill his pledge to meet with the most powerful leaders of the free world, including the president of the United States.

The president is highly interested in the situation of occupied Poland and asks Karski many questions. Karski talks in detail about the Nazi terror, the roundups in the streets, and about corruption among German officials and members of the military, thanks to which it is possible for the underground to purchase weapons and ammunition. Karski then launches into his – in the words of Ambassador Ciechanowski – "nerve-wrecking account of his visit to the Bełżec extermination camp, which he entered disguised as a guard, and witnessed people being murdered in rail cars." The president does not comment on this part of Karski's story. He says nothing in response to the clearly outlined demands of the Jewish leaders. He asks for details pertaining to the organization of the Polish Underground State and its liaison network.

He is curious whether planes equipped with skis could land and take off in Poland during the wintertime.

At the end, the president asks Karski about his further plans and, upon hearing that he is to return to Poland, asks him to communicate to the Polish leaders of the underground that Marshal Stalin has laid claim to a part of Polish territory. For giving up her territory in the east, Poland is to receive the former German territories to the north and west. The meeting, which lasted over an hour, ends with the president's grandiose words: "Tell your leaders that we are going to win this war and that the perpetrators will be punished for their crimes. Tell them also that Poland will come out of this war stronger than before. Tell the people of your country that they have a friend in the White House."



*President Franklin D. Roosevelt*

After the meeting with President Roosevelt, as in England, numerous public meetings await Karski. He also talks to reporters and various other influential people.

His stay in the United States lasts over three months. He returns to London on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943. As it turns out, it is not possible for him to return to Poland. The following announcement has been overheard on the German radio: "There is one Jan Karski milling around the United States. By using a false name, he is concealing his true political past. In reality, he is a Bolshevik agent sponsored by the American Jews." Stanisław Mikołajczyk, who took over as the prime minister following the death of General Sikorski, concludes that since "Karski" has been exposed, returning to Poland would be too great a risk for him.

The prime minister has a new special assignment for Karski. "Świt" ("Sunrise") is the name of a secret Polish radio station operating out of Bletchley, outside of London (the main British intelligence base; this was also where the German Enigma code was broken). Every day, the operators of this station receive fresh news from Poland and are able to listen in to other stations around the world.

They transmit programs pretending to originate from Poland. This is being carried off so well that the Germans – as well as the Polish listeners of “Świt” – are convinced that the broadcasts really do originate from somewhere within occupied Poland. And no one can make these radio broadcasts seem more authentic than Karski, given his knowledge of the underground and the realities of life in occupied Warsaw, including the everyday language. He is aided by another underground courier and member of the “*Cichociemni*” group, Tadeusz Chciuk (or “Marek Celt”), who like Karski had journeyed from Poland in 1943, reaching Great Britain through France and Spain.

Karski also has other responsibilities. He creates a detailed report from his mission to the United States. The report is signed off with the name “Znamierowski” and is transported to Poland by a Polish paratrooper (also one of the “*Cichociemni*”, Polish secret unit of the British army) in January of 1944.

Aside from his underground work in Bletchley, Karski is still sought-after due to his previous accomplishments. He gives lectures and readings for military personnel, as well as informal talks and interviews, and meets with politicians to whom for the umpteenth time he has to relate the details of his mission to the United States.

At the beginning of 1944, Poland’s position among the Allies becomes more and more difficult. The popularity of Stalin and the Soviet Union – with its blazing victories – is at its highest. For Poland not having renewed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union means that tensions increase between the two countries, as the eastern battlefield advances west in the direction of the former eastern boundary of the Republic of Poland. Instead of garnering praise and being admired for her determination to fight despite the great losses incurred, Poland is increasingly being viewed as a nuisance by the foreign leaders.

The Polish leaders are fully aware of how effective Karski’s mission to the United States was; so much so, that they decide to send him there once more. Now that he does not need to stay undercover, he may be able to reach a wider audience. Someone has the idea that he should develop a screenplay for a movie dealing with the Polish underground.

After arriving in the United States in the spring of 1944, Karski throws all his energy into what we would today call a public relations campaign. He gives readings and interviews, writes articles for the press and appears on the radio. This job is made difficult by the fact that at times he has to break through a wall of human indifference or even outright hostility. There are those however, who find his stories interesting or even compelling. Literary agent Emery Reves is one such person.



*Jan Karski as the host during an exhibition about the Polish Underground State in Baltimore, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944*

He suggests that Karski should write a book about the Polish underground. Soon the contract is signed and Karski moves to New York. There, he is given an English-Polish bilingual assistant who notes down his story, which then soon becomes the book *Story of a Secret State*.

Writing such an account is complicated by the fact that the war is still going on. Karski wants to stay true to the facts but at the same time, he cannot betray the underground or its secrets. “We worked like dogs” he told me during our meeting many years later, “but I had that book cooked in just under three months.”

A promotional campaign is organized by Reves before the book is due to come out. Because of the high interest on the part of the public, the book is printed in 360 000 copies, which is impressive by mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century standards. The campaign includes a book reading tour. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Karski is invited to speak at the annual banquet organized by the *New York Herald Tribune*.





*Jan Karski in New York, at work on his book *Story of a Secret State*, September 1944*

Attended by prominent politicians, it is held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, twelve days after the Capitulation of Warsaw following the Warsaw Uprising, which had claimed the lives of 180 000 Poles and resulted in the complete destruction of the capital by Germans – based on a direct order of Hitler .

*Story of a Secret State* hits the shelves in November of that year and receives excellent reviews. In December, it becomes the “Book of the Month Club” selection. Karski is nearly overwhelmed by invitations to meetings and readings, and many periodicals reprint sections of his book. The emissary from Poland has earned the status of a celebrity.

Meanwhile, the situation of Poland and the Polish people goes from bad to worse. Karski receives discreet reminders from the State Department that during his book readings and other public appearances, he is neither to mention the murders at Katyń, nor who is responsible for them.

A BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH-CLUB SELECTION  
IN THE ORIGINAL HOUGHTON MIFFLIN EDITION

# Story of a Secret State

The most incredible and dramatic story to  
come out of World War II. "Intrigue, horror  
and bravery that beats any thriller"

—New York Herald Tribune

by JAN KARSKI



*Story of a Secret State, the cover of one of the editions*



*The United States being personified in an advertisement for Karski's book drawn by Wladyslaw Karawiec, which ran in the Polish American daily Dziennik Chicagowski, January 25<sup>th</sup> 1945.*

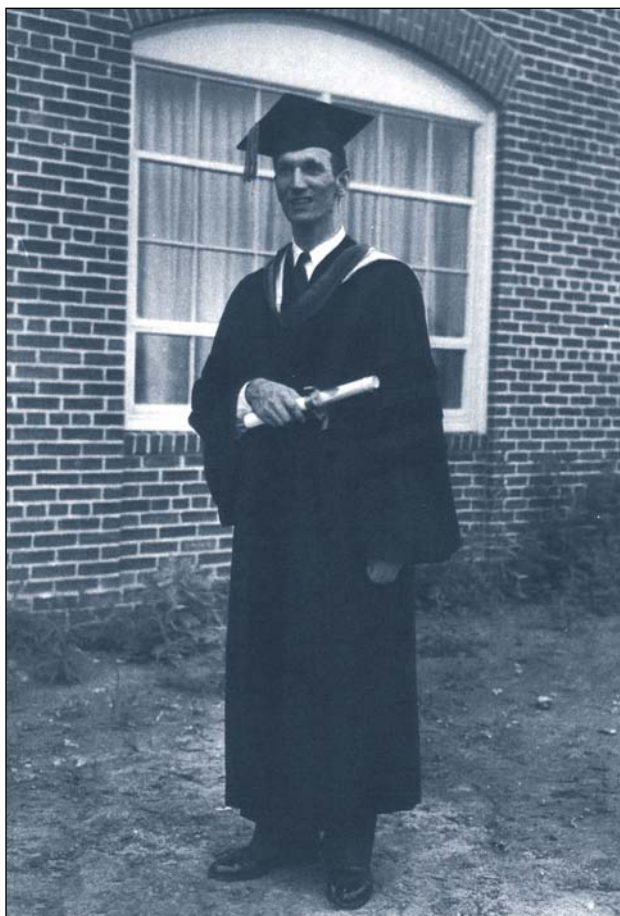
The next year is 1945. Joyous for the world and tragic for Poland. Following the Yalta Conference, the Provisional Government of National Unity (puppet communist government) is created in Poland by the Soviets and leaders of the Polish underground are arrested. Those whom Karski had portrayed in his book as heroes are trialed in Moscow as traitors. And the world is silent...

*To me, every one of those events in Moscow and Washington was like a stab in the heart. Now my world, my hopes and plans, lay in ruins. I could not fathom how it could all end like this. So many dead, so many sacrifices and struggles, so much faith in victory and in the Allied cause, so many reassurances from the mighty nations of this world – and then this?*



On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the American government withdraws its recognition of the Polish government-in-exile. The Polish embassy in Washington is taken over by representatives of the communist government, who arrive from Warsaw. Karski ceases to be a Polish diplomat and becomes a political exile...

The time has come for him to make a series of difficult life decisions. At 35, he is the author of a celebrated bestseller and at the same time a man without an occupation. He decides to get one by signing up to study at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, a Jesuit university located in Washington, D.C. In 1952, he earns his Ph.D.



*Jan Karski after his doctoral defense at Georgetown University,  
May 1953*



*For many years, Jan Karcki was one of the youngest instructors at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.*

First, he becomes an academic instructor, then an assistant professor, and finally he is promoted to the rank of full professor. His life had come full circle. He began as a student of a Jesuit secondary school in Poland and ended up as the professor of a Jesuit university in the United States.

In 1965, he marries Pola Nireńska. A famous dancer, she is also a refugee of the war and a survivor of the Holocaust, from which she had escaped to England. In 1949, she came to the United States to build a new life.

Karski devotes himself to research in the fields of history and political science. After many years of work, he completes his monumental two-volume monograph entitled *The Great Powers and Poland, 1919-1945: From Versailles to Yalta*. The book, as he said himself, is sad, because sad was the fate of Poland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Karski approaches his academic work and teaching responsibilities with the same dedication as his earlier endeavors. His students are outstanding and many go on to heady careers; hailing from Arkansas, one student in particular distinguishes himself from the rest. He is William Jefferson Clinton. \

Deeply engaged in his work and family life, Karski cuts himself off from his past and the divided Polish-American community. Naturally, he maintains no contact with Poland's communist government. He is not one to readily speak about his past. Like the other members of his generation who grew up in the newly-liberated Poland only to watch it come under the yoke of communism, he sees this turn of events as a personal defeat. When he does speak about wartime and post-war Polish history, it is with great bitterness. He also speaks with bitterness about the Allies, about their attitude towards Poland and the Holocaust. But publicly he is not willing to talk at all.

He breaks his long silence in 1977, after being approached by French film director Claude Lanzmann, who is preparing the monumental documentary *Shoah*, about the extermination of the European Jews. Not able to make up his mind at first, Karski finally agrees to give an interview. His story, which he tells in a trembling voice, may very well be the most disturbing and powerful segment of this exceptional movie. It was this movie that brought Karski back to the limelight, back to the world, so to say. In 1982, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem awards him with the title of the Righteous Among Nations, and the Israeli government declares him an honorary citizen of Israel.

YAD VASHEM  
HarHazikaron  
Jérusalem



יד ושם  
הר הזיכרון  
ירושלים

# תעודה ATTESTATION

Jan Karski

שם נפשו בכפו להצלת יהודים בתקופת השואה.  
AU PERIL DE SA VIE A SAUVÉ DES JUIFS PENDANT  
L'HOLOCAUSTE

נטע עץ בשדרת חסידי אומות העולם  
A PLANTÉ UN ARBRE DANS L'ALLÉE DES JUSTES

ביום ט"ז סיון תשמ"ב LE 7 JUIN 1982

בשם רשות הזיכרון ויד ושם  
Pour l'Institut du Souvenir Yad Vashem

בשם הוועדה לציון חסידי אומות העולם  
Pour la Commission des Justes

...וגתתי להם בביתי ובהומותי יד ושם... אשר לא יכרת. ישעיהו נ"ז  
...JE LEUR DONNERAI UNE PLACE ET UN NOM... QUI NE PERIRA PAS... ESAIE, 54

*Jan Karski's Righteous Among the Nations certificate of honor*



*The tablet by the tree that Jan Karski had planted on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1982 in the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations in Jerusalem*

And yet, in his native Poland, his story remains virtually unknown.

I made his acquaintance in 1986, in Chicago. At that time, I was one of the editors of the catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, based in Kraków. It took me a long time to convince him to grant me an interview, but ultimately I was successful. The result was *Nieudana misja (A Failed Mission)*, a relatively uncensored article which appeared in Poland in March of 1987, two years before the fall of communism. In it, Jan Karski not only talks about what he had lived through, but also bitterly sums up his daring wartime achievements.



*Professor Jan Karski  
receiving his honorary doctorate  
at Georgetown University,  
Washington D.C., in 1983*



*As is well known, the Jewish piece of my mission ended in failure. Six million Jews perished. No one gave them any effective help. Not any government, not any nation, not the Church. Aid – heroic aid – came solely from individuals. Because you and I know that the Jews were not totally forsaken. Over half a million Jews survived the Holocaust in Europe. Someone had to help them... Priests, nuns, peasants and laborers, underground organizations... Let me reiterate: the Jews were not abandoned by humanity. They were abandoned by governments, by social structures, by structures within the Church – but not by ordinary people. Organized social structures failed them, but not the people – of whom there must have been millions. Herein lies the optimism which should be passed on to the next generations, to whom the Holocaust is only a page taken from a history book.*



*Jan Karski visiting Lech Wałęsa  
the first President of free Poland*

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