



9-2014

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Arthur Feinsod

Indiana State University, Arthur.Feinsod@indstate.edu

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Recommended Citation

Feinsod, Arthur. Jan Karski and the sacrifice for the other: as presented in in the play coming to see aunt Sophie. Presented at the Jan Karski Memory and Responsibility Conference, September 20, 2014.

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**JAN KARSKI AND SACRIFICE FOR THE OTHER:
AS PRESENTED IN THE PLAY *COMING TO SEE AUNT SOPHIE*
By Arthur Feinsod**

The issue of this panel is larger than gentiles helping Jews though that is our specific focus. The larger issue – and the one we can use our specific focus to hopefully shed some light on -- is people in the majority culture willfully removing themselves from their protected status to help the “other,” i.e, the more vulnerable member of a persecuted minority within the greater society. The larger story includes whites marching with blacks at civil right rallies in the 1960’s or, in more recent times, straights marching with gays to demand marriage privileges or Muslims in Pakistan risking social rejection and even death in protecting Christian churches from fellow Muslims so Christians can pray in peace and safety. But our focus here is Christians helping Jews during the World War II years in Poland and Hungary. I will address the story of Jan Karski, in particular how I tell that story in my play *Coming to See Aunt Sophie*.

Before February 2013 I had never heard of Jan Karski. It was in that month that my old friend Mary Skinner came to Terre Haute’s Holocaust museum to screen her documentary about Irena Sendler. She invited me to breakfast the next day at which time she told me about Karski and said that a play needed to be written about him. She felt I was the one to do it, so I did it; I have learned that when Mary Skinner tells you need to do something, you just do it.

After nine months of research – and several working titles like *Karski Speaks* and *Karski’s Secret* -- I actually wrote the play very quickly during the month of December 2013. An important decision early on was to have two Karski’s – an Old Karski being interviewed by a French filmmaker loosely based on Claude Lanzmann for the Holocaust film *Shoah* – and a Young Karski, living the past incidents that Old Karski narrates. Another was to have two actors

– a male and female – play all the other roles, a decision based on knowing that those two actors would be Alex Miller from Mannheim, Germany and Julie Dixon, professor of acting at Indiana State University. I knew both of their skills quite well, having worked closely with them over the years in my capacity as Artistic Director of Crossroads Repertory Theatre in Indiana.

So...the first seventeen pages were completed by December 9th, and a whole first draft was completed by the first days of January. In May *Coming to See Aunt Sophie* opened in Mannheim, Germany for its world premiere, soon followed by a Polish tour – with Polish subtitles -- to three cities: Karski's hometown of Łódź, Kielce, then Warsaw, where it was performed on the grounds of the old Jewish ghetto at the Museum for the History of Polish Jews. The performance was sponsored by the Museum of Polish History in collaboration with the Jan Karski Foundation.

The play is structured around the Catholic Young Karski's developing relationship with – and evolving empathy for – Polish Jews, starting with his childhood connection with them. Karski grew up in Łódź, Poland which, before the World War II, had a Jewish population of 233,000, which gave it the second largest Jewish population in Europe. Jews constituted roughly one third of the city's population. Young Karski and his family had plenty of opportunities to interact with Łódź Jews. Karski had Jewish classmates in school and speaks about how, early on, they would help him in math and science while he helped them in Polish history – which comes out in a scene early in my play.

But it would be misleading to imply that Polish Jews in general intermingled easily and happily with the majority Catholic population. Anti-Semitism always existed in one form or another throughout Poland, including in Łódź – sometimes more, sometimes less -- but it worsened with the rise of Nazism next door in Germany in the 1930's when the spread of Nazi

propaganda made its way to Poland. Organized attacks that wounded and even killed Łódź Jews occurred in April 1933, May 1934 and September 1935, years before the German invasion of Poland.

But anti-Semitism has always been counter-balanced by Poles who have stood up against it and acted to promote positive relations with Jews. The most obvious examples are those whom Israel and the United States continue to honor every year as examples of the “Righteous” (and Jan Karski and Irena Sendler have been so duly honored) – Polish Catholics who risked their lives -- and that of their families and neighbors -- to hide and protect Jews during World War II. Moved by their extraordinary sacrifices, I specifically decided to dedicate our Polish tour this May to these heroic individuals – people like Irena Sendler and Jan Karski – and other “Righteous” individuals.

But even before the brave acts of the “righteous,” Polish Jews found friends in high places, even the highest places, especially in Józef Piłsudski. He was the architect behind Polish Independence: first Chief of State and Chief Commander of the Polish Army, then first Marshal of Poland, then twice prime minister. His influence was strong even until his death in 1935. Improving the lot of Poland’s ethnic minorities, especially the Jews, was part of his larger plan of national stabilization and state-assimilation and Polish Jews were very much included in that plan. Thus the Jews of Poland viewed the years 1926 to 1935 -- and Piłsudski himself -- quite favorably, crediting him for holding anti-Semitic currents in check. Besides being seen by many Poles as the Father of his Nation, he was widely viewed as a friend of the Jewish people. Polish Jews widely felt that Piłsudski's death in 1935 led to a deterioration in the quality of their lives.

Piłsudski's influence, even after his death, was quite profound and wide in Polish society. One of his great admirers was Jan Karski's mother, Walentyna Kozielski, who took to heart the idea that Catholic faith and favorable treatment of minorities went hand in hand. Years later Karski would say that he was formed by two traditions: religion and the cult of Piłsudski, the latter mostly through his mother whose admiration for him permeated the atmosphere in the Kozielski home.

Walentyna was also a devout Catholic. She imbued Karski with Christian values which included respect for people of other cultures and religions, and this fact is highlighted by the rat incident that I present in my play *Coming to See Aunt Sophie*. After some Łódź anti-Semites threw a dead rat over the wall while their Jewish neighbors were praying during the Jewish fall harvest holiday of Sukkot, Karski's mother asks Karski to stand outside the wall the very next night, armed only with a whistle, so he could alert her if they were to return. They didn't but this incident, which took place in the 1920's, reveals a lot about Karski's upbringing and his mother's willingness to put her own son's safety in support of members of a targeted minority.

Karski carried these values imparted to him through his mother in his early training as a diplomat and his brief time as a soldier before he found himself in a detention camp first by the Russians, then by the Germans. Karski's attitudes toward Jews surfaced later, as he became aware of Nazi atrocities, first through heard accounts and later, famously, by his own eye witness accounts. One of the most extraordinarily influential encounters was with Zofia Kossak, the great Polish woman writer who had already become famous on an international scale before the war. While allegedly anti-Semitic in her youth, a fact Kossak shares with Karski in my play, her attitudes changed dramatically when she saw what was happening and she herself experienced

firsthand the cruelty of a German policeman against a young Jewish child in Warsaw. All this contributed to her collaboration in the founding of Żegota, an organization of Catholics devoted to aiding the Polish Jews. She recruited Karski to join, again shown in a scene from *Coming to See Aunt Sophie*.

So already Karski was working on behalf of saving Jews when, in his third mission as a courier for the Polish Underground, he was given the task of taking to the Allies hundreds of pages of information shrunk on microfilm and welded into a simple house key. Having any material object on you when you were a courier was incredibly risky as Karski learned first hand when he was pressured to carry a role of microfilm, was betrayed and caught by the Gestapo, and seriously tortured, leading to a suicide attempt, hospitalization in a Nazi-run facility that was penetrated by the Polish Underground leading to his escape. All this, by the way, is recounted in my play.

Before leaving for Britain, Karski was given the opportunity to meet two members of the Jewish faction of the Polish Underground, BUND leader Leon Feiner and Zionist organizer Menaechem Kirschenbaum. Karski's harrowing secret meeting with them gave him a sense of urgency about his report regarding the Nazi heinous "final solution" policy. In his 1944 book *Story of a Secret State*, Karski describes the atmosphere in the room in which he met them. This eloquent, indeed theatrical, description was a great inspiration for me:

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It was an evening of nightmare, but with a painful, oppressive kind of reality that no nightmare ever had. I sat in an old rickety armchair that had two bricks stacked one on top of the other in place of one leg. I didn't move for fear of falling, or – I don't know – perhaps because what I was hearing had frozen me to the spot in terror. They paced the

floor violently, their shadows dancing weirdly in the dim light cast by the single candle we could allow ourselves. It was as though they were unable even to think of their dying people and remain seated.

The contrast between the restrained Leon Feiner, appearing like a dignified Polish aristocrat and Menaechem Kirschenbaum, wearing his emotions on his sleeve. This is all well documented in Karski's book.

My Act One ends after Karski accepts Feiner's offer to accompany him into the Warsaw Ghetto, disguised as a Jew. Before going into detail about this dangerous mission, Old Karski jumps ahead in his memory of an incident that took place in his first visit to the Jewish Ghetto. It is his encounter with a Jewish child, an image that – according to Kaya Mirecka-Ploss, Karski's best friend and confidante during the last years of his life -- haunted Karski until his dying day. This event is so painful to Karski that he refuses to talk about it on camera; I have no idea if this is why there is no mention of this story in the Lanzmann manuscript for his interview with Karski for Shoah, but it certainly would explain it. The filming is interrupted as Karski's second wife Pola Nirenska, a noted choreographer and the love of Karski's life, enters as anticipated to serve them lunch, only to learn that Karski has broken his vow to her not to speak with anyone (including each other) about the war years by allowing the interview to be about his involvement in the war years. They even refused to speak Polish in their home, even though it was, for both of them, their mother tongue. This vow was made because Pola, a Polish Jew, lost brothers and sisters in the war, which was the main reason for making their pact. As Act One ends, she is furious at him for breaking his vow – and the filmmaker for pressuring him into doing it.

The action of Act Two begins after lunch. Pola has served Karski and the French filmmaker lunch and we are back to Karski being filmed as he talks about his experience disguised as a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto – an action would have certainly gotten him shot if caught. The historical record shows he went twice into the Ghetto but once again I take the liberty of compressing the two visits into one, to keep the action flowing. By making this elision, however, I acknowledge that I lose something important about Karski's courage and sacrifice since going a second time was at least twice the danger of going once. And it is also important in that it shows Karski's determination to make sure he gets as full and accurate an eye-witness account as possible so that his testimony to Western leaders would be given its due weight.

Soon after Karski's visit to the walled-off Jewish Ghetto, Feiner asks him if he is willing to be sneaked into a concentration camp – or at least a holding station on the way to a concentration – called Izbica. Karski would enter disguised as a guard. When Karski describes this in his 1944 book *The Story of a Secret State*, he mentions that he entered disguised as an Estonian guard. Because the war was still going on and he did not want to endanger the lives of those who actually helped him, he substituted Estonian guards for Ukrainian ones. The updated edition of his book, reissued in 1999 in Poland and then by Georgetown University Press in 2013, includes a note that corrects this purposeful misidentification.

The biggest impact of the Izbica experience comes in seeing the Jews loaded into the trains and hearing later what they endured inside the cars themselves. Instead of having Karski provide this report at this time in the play, I purposely delay it to one of the times he actually gave the details of this part of his visit to Izbica, which was when he gives his testimony to

Justice Frankfurter. Knowing now that this would have been what has been described as the complete account of his firsthand experiences in the Ghetto and Izbica that he came Justice Frankfurter, I withheld it until that meeting for dramatic impact but also to underscore Frankfurter's shocking response to Karski's report. Of course we cannot help noting the irony that this disturbing response to the report comes from Frankfurter, who is himself a Jew.

Back to the play, we see Young Karski's physical and psychological breakdown at seeing the Jews being pressed into the trains and another suicide attempt for Karski at the torture he experiences seeing what he sees in Izbica. As he explains in my play, the torture of witnessing that was much worse than anything the Nazis could have done to his *own* body.

Finally Karski arrives in Great Britain but he is denied access to Winston Churchill. With the help of Polish President-in-exile Sikorsky he goes to America where he gives he report first to Frankfurter, then to President Roosevelt.

The climax of my play actually occurs after Karski gives his account to the filmmaker. He once again demands that the camera be turned off and then he explodes at all those who didn't do enough to stop the Holocaust, including himself. I won't go into details about this for those of you who haven't seen the play (which, by the way, will be presented across town at the Chopin Theatre this afternoon at 2:00 and tomorrow at 6:00, also at the Chopin Theatre). Suffice it to say that his heroic status is only enhanced as he interrogates himself at not doing enough. His self-condemnation lifts our sense of his humanity as he verbally whips himself at having failed to stop the Holocaust.

A sidebar here: As I was working on this play, I watched very carefully the clips of Karski's interviews on youtube excerpted from the Landsmann interviews for *Shoah* as well as his testimony in the final section of *Shoah* itself. I detected something while watching this distinguished Georgetown professor at the age of 64 speak, something that caught my interest, my intuition that he wasn't saying everything that he was feeling. I then made a fateful call to Kaya Mirecka-Ploss, his confidante at the end of his life. She confirmed what I had sensed—and that gave me the ending of my play: Karski's struggle with his younger self about what he did and didn't do.

The relevant issue for me is, regardless of how he assesses himself and his actions, Karski risked his life many times to try to stop the Holocaust and save people whom he could just as easily have ignored. He was not Jewish and he could have turned his back and pretended not to see, like so many of his countrymen and fellow Catholics. But this man was so deeply outraged, so profoundly moved by the plight of the Polish Jews, that he couldn't live with himself unless he took extraordinary measures to do what he could. Thus he risked his life on two separate occasions sneaking into the walled-off Warsaw Ghetto, *once* in sneaking into Izbica disguised as a guard, many times on his way through Nazi-occupied Europe with a welded-shut key in his pocket and armed only with the secret pass code: "Coming to See Aunt Sophie." And this was a man who had once before been caught delivering something, for which he was tortured by the Gestapo, so he knew in his body the risks, every day, and yet he still chose to continue on until he reached the White House to deliver his message to the one person whom he and his fellow members of the Polish Resistance felt could do something about it: the American president.

Irena Sendler and Jan Karski all realized that thousands of innocent lives were on the line. Since it was widely known that the Nazis would kill whole families, even a whole neighborhood, if one family were caught helping, aiding and hiding Jews, the heroic decision of these individuals to help the other was taking unimaginable risks. But they did it anyway.

It is so interesting to me that Catholics, like Zofia Kossak, interpreted their Catholic faith as not to allow them to turn their backs on innocents who were dying, regardless of whether they were of the same faith. Others might have rationalized their inactions with another way of looking at their Catholic faith, like, "Well, they are responsible for killing Jesus and now they are getting what they deserve." Or, even, perhaps somewhat less callously, the only way to God is through Jesus; Jews should know this and if they don't, that's their problem."

But it isn't just aspects of Catholicism or Christianity in general that allows for these kinds of misapplications of religious teachings. All religions have them, all have something that they can use for rationalizing avoidance of the call for help from the Other...or for preferring the lives and welfare of one's own over that of the Other. Some Muslims might say, "Those people don't believe in the prophet Mohammad, therefore they are evil." Or Jews may say, "Well, we have a special covenant with Abraham that other religions don't have, which makes us the chosen people and therefore Muslim and Christian deaths are less important than Jewish deaths." It seems as though every religion has a loophole, something that can be used to separate themselves from the other and rationalize a turning of one's back...or worse: corroborating with the instigators of evil.

It then throws the question back to us: do we allow religion to help us rationalize not helping those in need, particularly those from different faiths or cultures? Can we learn from

Kossak and Karski that the Other often depends on help from those within the safety of majority status? Those who are targeted often become paralyzed in the face of prejudice, hate crimes and particularly genocide. Where do we find in our faith, regardless of what our faith is, the place where all human suffering is our suffering, or, as Martin Luther King Jr. says in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Or as the great Catholic Mother Teresa once said, “The problem with the world is that we sometimes draw the circle of family too small.” Conceiving the world as did Mother Teresa seemed to be no problem for Irene Sendler or Jan Karski...

If we are Jewish and Catholic, then, we must take seriously that there are thousands – maybe millions -- of Muslims around the world who are living peacefully in countries as minorities where they are being blamed for the radicalism of people who have (as the Muslim playwright/performer Rohina Malik has termed it) “hijacked Islam by putting it to violent purposes.” Like many American Muslims, Rohina Malik explains how she has learned from her Islamic faith the values of selfless charity, love and brotherhood toward her fellow human beings, including toward all “people of the book,” which is how Jews and Christians are referred to by Muslims. Should we turn our back when they are scapegoated and subject to hate crimes for acts being done thousands of miles away, acts that appall them as much as they do us, acts they, as devout Muslims, also consider sinful? We all must take seriously that our jobs as Jews, Christians and Muslims is not only to care for our own, but also the “other” – and by doing this we follow the noble examples of Irena Sendler and Jan Karski -- because one day we may become the “other,” and we, too, may be paralyzed with fear as we are targeted, and we, too, may need to look for help from those who have protected status because they are part of the

majority. We should be able to hope that they would stand by us in the name of fundamental religious beliefs and values common to all faiths.

At the end of my play, at least as interpreted by the director Dale McFadden, the actor playing Old Karski turns to the audience and says, “The End.” This July we performed SOPHIE at St. Mary-of-the-Woods in West Terre Haute, the site of the Sisters of Providence who sponsored the performance. Afterwards a Catholic priest came up to me and said his only criticism was the final words uttered by Old Karski: “The End.” He said, “Sadly it isn’t the end.” If we can trust recent surveys, anti-Semitism still rages in the United States and Poland – even today, even with World War II in the memory of many of our oldest citizens. Hate crimes occur in the United States everyday against African Americans, Jews, Muslims and gays. It is vital that those of us who are white, Christian and straight remove ourselves from our protected status and stand in unsafe places with those in the persecuted minorities and demand that these crimes stop because in time hate crimes can become institutionally sanctioned and turn into genocide, as the Germans and Rwandans can attest. And we mustn’t look for the loopholes each of our religions offers. We must all see ourselves as standing outside the wall on a cold night with a whistle, alongside that boy from Łódź who grew up to be a Holocaust hero. The Karski gauntlet remains at all of our feet.

Thank you. I now would like to entertain questions.

After questions, I now open the floor to discussion.