



9-2014

## Debating the Literary and Filmic Memory of Jan Karski

Sue Vice

*University of Sheffield*, [s.vice@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:s.vice@sheffield.ac.uk)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jankarski>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vice, Sue. Karski's testimony on the Holocaust: story of a secret state, shoah, and the Karski report. Presented at the Jan Karski Memory and Responsibility Conference, September 20, 2014.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jan Karski Conference by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
© 2014 Sue Vice.

Jan Karski has been the subject of historical and memorial inquiry, as we have heard so far in this conference. He has also been the subject of different kinds of literary and visual representation, such as documentary film and television, and fiction of various kinds, including a graphic novel. I will discuss the different uses and interpretations made of the figure of Karski in these varied genres, as well as the conflicts that occur, sometimes explicitly, between them.

I will start with an example of such a clash of interpretations, that between the director Claude Lanzmann and the writer Yannick Haenel. In 2009, Haenel published his novel *Jan Karski*, a fictionalized vision of the wartime envoy. His novel relies on Lanzmann's interview with Karski in *Shoah*, and Karski's own writings in *Story of a Secret State*. The novel also, in its last section, features 'scenes, phrases and thoughts' which Haenel has 'invented' and attributed to Karski. It is these to which Lanzmann has strongly objected. Such moments include the fictional Karski accusing Lanzmann of 'injustice' in his representation of the Polish people, as well as the 'complete alteration' of the meaning of Karski's own words, since 'only forty minutes' of the two-day interview appear in *Shoah*. The fictional Karski suggests that Lanzmann must have moved the focus of his film away from that of the 'saving of the Jews', since only the account of his experience in the Ghetto, and not his invitation to report to Franklin Roosevelt and Felix Frankfurter in Washington, remains in the film's final version; there is 'nothing' on his efforts to 'transmit the message' from the Jewish leaders to the Allies, nor about 'American indifference' to it. These are details that Lanzmann describes as filling him with 'shame and anger'. A sustained public debate between him and Haenel followed, which addressed not only the legacy of Karski as interpreted by the two participants, but differences between 'the functions of

documentary and fiction' themselves. The centre of the debate was not only whether Haenel had the 'right' to use material from *Shoah* in his novel (Lanzmann referred to him as a 'parasite' for so doing) but also the precise role of Karski's report to Roosevelt in 1943.

Yet Lanzmann's view is different. We can see from his statement that, 'in 1978 I had already filmed with Karski everything this 'novel' invents', that the logical conclusion was for the director to edit and release the footage that had not appeared in *Shoah*. *The Karski Report* appeared less than a year later, of which Lanzmann declared, 'I took this decision [to release the film] because it seemed to me absolutely necessary to establish the truth.' We might reasonably ask what this 'truth' is. In part, it is the truth of Haenel's effrontery; the truth of the fact that the rescue of the Jews was, as the film's prologue puts it, 'impossible' in any case; and, in more philosophical vein, truth in the sense of a concern with meta-questions about the very nature of understanding and knowledge of the Holocaust.

So what kind of a representation is *The Karski Report*? It's a film which has been edited to give what Remy Bresson calls an 'impression of realness', with its focus on the witness and lacking any exterior shots. It seems to take place in real time, but has of course been cut down from several hours of footage to a mere 48 minutes. *The Karski Report* is, like *Shoah*, a 'fiction of the real', in Lanzmann's phrase, as the double reference of its title suggests. The title refers both to the report the courier delivered in 1943, and in the present of viewing the film, to the account that we hear him give. Although now we may possess the historical knowledge of genocide that Roosevelt and his confidant Frankfurter could not take in, it remains the case that

‘healthy humanity, rational humanity, who did not see it with their own eyes’, as Karski puts it, cannot understand. The position of the audience of the past, including Roosevelt and Frankfurter, is taken up by the film’s spectators in the present.

*The Karski Report* opens on a close-up of Jan Karski’s face, in a short sequence reproduced from *Shoah*, and we hear again the words from the conclusion to his interview there: he says, ‘But I reported - what I saw’. Lanzmann claims of this moment in the earlier film that it was the interview’s only possible conclusion: ‘Everybody knows that the Jews were not rescued. [Karski] didn't need to say more. It was very strong to end that way.’ So Lanzmann’s concerns are for the filmic structure as it supports the meaning of the sequence. In *The Karski Report*, Karski is able to describe more objectively the response that we saw overwhelm him in the earlier film – ‘I am much weaker emotionally. I break down’, as he puts it of his post-war life - although even here his eyes glisten with unshed tears. For the most part, however, Karski has regained his composure; the comforting hand on his shoulder, that of his wife, Pola Nirenska, which we saw in *Shoah* is no longer visible; Karski claims that ‘unable to bear it, she left the house’ during the interview.

Karski’s recounting the ambassador’s words of advice about how to conduct himself in Roosevelt’s presence has a metacinematic effect, in this film all about talking and listening. An auditory connection is established between the two moments of the delivery of the report and the time of the interview, some thirty-five years later, by Karski’s account of the ‘most intimate’ moments in 1943 that passed between him and the ambassador when the latter walked his dog Krzysiek at night; in the present, Karski’s own pet dog can be heard, although is never seen, shaking itself and panting.

During their evening walks, Ciechanowski advised Karski to be very precise; not to talk too much, as was the latter's habit; and to attend to Roosevelt's questions, a piece of advice that has an ironic resonance for the spectator, since in the present Karski does not always answer Lanzmann but prefers to narrate his own story. As he does in relation to the Jewish leaders in *Shoah*, here Karski reinhabits the persona of his interlocutor Roosevelt, and reproduces his words in a slower, deeper voice, giving what one reviewer described as 'a fair imitation of Roosevelt's pronunciation' of the word 'war': 'The Allied nations are going to win this war. No more wars. Justice will be done ... The United States will not abandon your country'. Yet we learn that 'not a single' question followed Karski's words on the subject of the 'Jewish problem', although he put this in incontrovertible terms: 'Mr President, the situation is horrible. Without the outside help, the Jews will perish in Poland'. Karski replies to Lanzmann's response, 'Did he understand the fantastic emergency?', with just the kind of precision and concision that Chiecanowski urged: 'I think [he] did not'.

However, the centre of the film is not Karski's encounter with the President, as Haenel's novel implies, although the notion of not understanding what one has heard appears here for the first time. The time devoted to the meeting with Roosevelt is in the manner of a prelude to that with Frankfurter. In contrast to Roosevelt, who 'looked like a world leader', Karski describes Frankfurter twice as a 'small man', one who became perceptibly 'smaller and smaller' as Karski repeated his report about the 'Jewish leaders, the Ghetto, Bełżec'. Such is the significance of this remembered scene that Karski allows Frankfurter to inhabit his body as he gives a kinetic account of the Justice's response. First Karski casts his eyes to the floor, as Frankfurter did on hearing his story, then enacts the latter's standing up in order to declare that he 'must

be totally honest', then declares, 'I do not believe you!' Ciechanowski takes Frankfurter's words to cast doubt on Karski's reliability as a witness, for which the ambassador's presence was to vouch. However, it is not the envoy but his message to which Frankfurter refers, as he clarifies with formal precision by means of Karski's reenactment: 'Mr Ambassador, I did not say that he is lying. I said that I don't believe him. These are different things'. It is this utterance, in the form of Frankfurter's words ventriloquized by Karski, with its separation of knowledge and belief, that lies at the heart of *The Karski Report*, and constitutes the centre of its report to the spectator. We are far from Haenel's claim that footage of the second day's interview with Karski would offer a factual or moral counterbalance to that in *Shoah* by revealing Karski's own efforts to 'save the Jews', as the fictional Karski puts it. Indeed, as Annette Wieviorka has argued, the novel gives the Holocaust an 'a posteriori' central role in the encounter between Karski and Roosevelt which it did not have in 1943. In the film Karski makes a similar point, in observing that, at the time of his meeting, 'For me, the Jewish problem was not the only problem. For me, the key problem was Poland ... what was going to happen to the Polish nation?' He expresses his own version of Frankfurter's inability to reconcile information with acceptance, even in his position as a firsthand witness: 'What I saw in this respect, Jewish extermination, is incomprehensible for me'. The tenses of Karski's utterance embody a psychic accuracy: despite his own act of witness in the past, the events remain incomprehensible in the present.

This moment in *The Karski Report* of Frankfurter's refusal to believe offers not just a philosophical but a temporal challenge to the spectator, insisting on a return to a moment where the 'obscurity' of understanding, in Lanzmann's celebrated phrase,

was first acknowledged. In concluding this sequence, Karski takes his head in his hands to reincarnate Frankfurter's own act of matching gesture to repudiation, and speaks the latter's words: 'My mind, my heart, they are made in such a way that I cannot accept it. No! No!' In the interview's present, Karski's verdict on these words, 'It was a shock to me', is matched by his action of sitting down: we witness the abandonment of the persona of Frankfurter by means of the 'shock' of his return to his seat and to his own first-person utterance. The film's temporal significance, and its efforts to retrieve the moment of 1943 in the present, is apparent in Lanzmann's response to Karski after his reenactment has ended. The director's question, 'Did you remember Warsaw when you were here in Washington?' uses the adverb 'here' in relation to both space and time, referring not to the present moment of 1978 but to Karski's visit in 1943. Even more ambiguously, Lanzmann's question – 'Is it possible to grasp the destruction of the Jews, when one lives in Washington?' - refers to Roosevelt and Frankfurter in wartime Washington, but also to the audience, in the present, watching this scene in the capital. Karski simply replies, 'At that time: probably not'.

While the disagreement between Lanzmann and Haenel represents a clash between historical estimates of the possibility of rescue and reality of knowledge; and Lanzmann's point about belief, the figure of Karski has had a different, and unacknowledged, role in Misha Defonseca's alleged Holocaust testimony *Surviving with Wolves* from 1997, which has since been shown to be entirely invented. Here, the value placed on his witness statements, which Defonseca borrowed to shore up what turned out to be a completely fictive memoir, was that of his outsider's eye view of the Warsaw Ghetto. While we know that Karski was smuggled into the Ghetto and

out again, in *Surviving with Wolves* this is used as a model for a child who miraculously enters the Ghetto searching for her parents, and is able to leave again. This represents a fascinating misreading of Karski's text, and one that could have constituted a clue to the fact that Defonseca's account was composed out of the shreds of others'. She uses Karski's account from *Shoah* to construct the notion of an onlooker who is protected from violence. Her verdict on the Ghetto is that 'I had arrived in something that was not life, this was not a town, and these were not real people' (122). Both this vantage point and such a conclusion draw on Karski's words: in his interview with Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*, Karski says of the Warsaw Ghetto, 'It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity.' However, Misha does not repeat Karski's conclusion, following from these observations, that 'I did not belong there', since the point of her story is to insist that she does. Karski's remarkable feats thus are transformed by Defonseca into the chance encounters of a child, as we see in another borrowing: Karski's account of being told to blend in with the guards in order to witness what happened in the camp – 'I was to join them, mingling with the mob of mixed attendants' – also has its invented counterpart. When she approaches the Warsaw Ghetto, Misha decides to join a column of Jews in case they can lead her to her parents, and the description of her experience mimics Karski's: 'All I had to do was slip in among the other children' (117).

To conclude, it seems that in three of the cases I have mentioned, the figure and testimony of Jan Karski are used for the author's own aesthetic and ideological purposes. This seems to me the source of the contretemps between Lanzmann and Haenel: while the novelist focuses on the historical fact of the possibility of rescue, Lanzmann's film is a philosophical meditation on our response to the wartime



genocide. The priority of the author's concerns is made especially clear in Defonseca's case, where she relied upon Karski's testimony from *Shoah* although it did not suit her invention: she was supposed to be a Jewish child, not a Polish onlooker in the Ghetto.