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Jan Karski and the Sacrifice for the Other: As Presented in the Play Coming to See Aunt Sophie

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**JAN KARSKI AND THE SACRIFICE FOR THE OTHER:
AS PRESENTED IN *COMING TO SEE AUNT SOPHIE*
A Talk by its Playwright Arthur Feinsod**

I must confess that before February 2013 I had never heard of Jan Karski. During that month my old friend Mary Skinner came to CANDLES, Terre Haute's Holocaust Museum, to screen her PBS documentary about another Polish hero of the Holocaust, Irena Sendler. I hadn't seen Mary since the mid 1970's when I had directed her in a short Beckett play while she was an undergraduate at UC Berkeley and I was a graduate student. After the screening of her powerful and sensitive documentary about Sendler, Mary asked me if I had ever heard of Jan Karski. I admitted I had not. Over breakfast the next day she told me about him and said a play needed to be written about this Polish hero of the Holocaust for the centenary of his 1914 birth that would happen the following year, 2014. I felt honored when she declared I was the right person to write it, so I wrote it; I've learned when Mary Skinner tells you to do something, you do it.

After nine months of research, I wrote the play quite quickly December 2013 through January 2014. The title came when I learned that "coming to see Aunt Sophie" was the passcode bestowed on Karski by the Polish Underground for making his way, under cover, through Nazi-occupied Europe.

An important decision I made early on was to have in my play two Karski's – an Old Karski being interviewed by a French filmmaker loosely based on Claude Lanzmann who interviewed Karski for his Holocaust film *Shoah* – and a Young Karski, living the past incidents that Old Karski narrates. The idea of an old and young version of the same character is not original; Marsha Norman, for instance, uses this device in her play *Getting Out* written long before mine, but I do it quite differently than Norman did. Specifically, my choice came from my need to capture Karski's desire at the end of his life to weigh the value of what he did as a young

man, even though he never talked about his past with anyone, in fulfillment of his promise to his wife Pola, who was deeply traumatized by her own Holocaust experience and that of her family. Karski broke this vow in agreeing to speak to Lanzmann, the broken promise being an issue that arises in the play.

Another early choice I made in writing the play was to have two actors play all the other roles, a decision based on knowing the skills of the two actors we had cast for its premiere tour. The Male Other would be played by Alex Miller, an actor whom I knew from exchanges I had arranged between Trinity College and then Indiana State with his theater company in Mannheim, Germany. The role of the Female Other would be taken by my Indiana State colleague Julie Dixon, professor of acting, both of whose skills I admired greatly. I decided to have only two actors play all those roles more for budgetary reasons than artistic ones; when I brought the play back to Indiana, we could afford a larger cast so I increased the “others” to three males and two females to decrease the number of characters each actor had to play, thereby easing the burden of these challenging roles. After the Crossroads production, I compromised and reworked the play for two males and two females (six characters in all), which became my preferred way of doing the play ever since, though some companies with tight budgets have requested my permission to do the original four-actor version.

So...the first seventeen pages took me only nine days to write. I completed them on December 9th, 2013 and a whole first draft was completed by the first days of January. Through Mary Skinner, I sent the first seventeen pages to Eva, the head of the national history museum of Warsaw who, eager to find a vehicle for honoring the Karski anniversary, told me that she would find the money to fund a tour through Poland during Karski’s centenary year. My old friends at

TIG 7 in Mannheim also read these same first seventeen pages and said they wanted the play to premiere, appropriately and ironically, in Germany, at their little theater.

And so, in May 2014 *Coming to See Aunt Sophie* opened in Mannheim, Germany for its world premiere directed by Dale McFadden, who, at the time, was the Head of Acting and Directing at the University of Indiana, Bloomington and whom I had hired several times earlier to direct at Crossroads Repertory Theatre in Terre Haute while I was Artistic Director there. After the Mannheim premiere, we toured the play – with subtitles -- to three Polish cities: Karski's hometown of Łódź, then Kielce, Poland (which had a terrible *pogrom* against Jews returning to the town after gaining their freedom from concentration camps), and then Warsaw, where it was performed on the grounds of the old Jewish ghetto at the Museum for the History of Polish Jews, the same ghetto that Karski was snuck into and snuck out of so he could be an eye-witness to what was happening to Polish Jews there before they were packed into trains and sent off to Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps in Poland.

The play is structured around Young Karski's developing relationship with – and evolving empathy for – the Polish Jews, from his childhood connection with them. Karski grew up in Łódź, Poland which, before World War II, had a Jewish population of 233,000, giving it the second largest Jewish population in Europe, and representing, roughly, one third of the city's population. Young Karski and his family had plenty of opportunities to interact with Łódź Jews. For example, Karski had Jewish classmates in school. He wrote about how, early on, his Jewish friends would help him in math and science while he helped them in Polish history.

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 Europe, including Poland and therefore including 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 found its way all-too-easily into Poland. Organized attacks that wounded and even killed Łódź Jews occurred while Karski was there: in April 1933, May 1934 and September 1935.

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 honors as the *Yad Vashem* or "the Righteous Among the Nations" which includes any non-Jews who can be proven to have helped protect and defend Jews during the Holocaust at the risk of their own lives and of the lives of their neighbors and families. It is important to note there are more Polish people who are so honored than members of any other country, religion or nationality: 7,280 Poles (overwhelmingly Catholic), to be exact, are honored for their efforts to save Jews from probable death at the hands of the Nazis and those they dominated or influenced.

Even before the brave acts of the "righteous," Polish Jews found friends in high places, even the highest places, especially between 1926 and 1935 under Józef Piłsudski's rule. Improving the lot of Poland's ethnic minorities, especially the Jews, was part of his larger plan of national stabilization. Piłsudski promoted a policy of "state-assimilation," which included Polish Jews. Thus the Jews of Poland viewed the years 1926 to 1935 -- and Piłsudski himself -- quite favorably, crediting Piłsudski for holding anti-Semitic tendencies in check. A friend and protector to the Jews, Piłsudski's death in 1935 led to a rapid deterioration in the quality of life for Poland's Jews and a rise in anti-Semitism, which had, of course, tragic consequences.

One great admirer of Piłsudski was Karski's mother, who took to heart the idea that Catholic faith and favorable treatment of minorities went hand in hand. A devout Catholic in this vein, she taught Karski to respect people of other cultures and religions, and this fact is

highlighted by the rat incident I present in *Coming to See Aunt Sophie*. When Karski was a mere boy an incident occurred where young anti-Semites from Łódź threw a dead rat over a wall at their Jewish neighbors who were in the act of praying during the fall Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Karski's mother was outraged. She ordered her son to stand outside the wall the very next night, armed only with a whistle, so he could alert her if they were to return so she could come out and beat them with her broom. This incident, which took place in the 1920's, reveals a lot about the Holocaust hero's upbringing and his mother's powerful courage and influence on him.

Karski carried his mother's interfaith values through his life as a career diplomat in training, his brief time as a soldier before he was incarcerated first by the Russians, then by the Germans, then by the Germans again after his suicide attempt. But these values were fanned by his experiences later, as he became aware of Nazi atrocities, first by rumored accounts and famously later, by his own eye-witness accounts. One of the most extraordinarily influential encounters for Karski involved 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 to Polish Jews at the hands of the Germans and her fellow Poles. She herself witnessed firsthand the cruelty of a policeman against a young Jewish child in Warsaw, an experience she never forgot. All this contributed to her collaboration in the founding of Żegota, an organization of Catholics devoted to aiding the Jews in Poland. She recruited Karski to join, a scene enacted in *Coming to See Aunt Sophie*.

So already Karski was working on behalf of Jews when, in his third mission as a courier for the Polish Underground, he was assigned the dangerous mission of traveling from Poland

through Nazi-occupied Europe to deliver to the Allies hundreds of pages of information about the mass extermination of the Jews shrunk onto microfilm and welded into a simple house key.

Before leaving for Britain, he met with two members of the Jewish faction of the Polish Underground, Leon Feiner and Menaechem Kirschenbaum. The harrowing secret meeting with them gave him a sense of urgency to report to the world about the heinous “final solution” policy the Nazis had begun to implement on a large scale in Germany and the countries they occupied, including Poland. Karski’s description of the atmosphere in the room in which he met them in his autobiographical *The Story of the Secret State* inspired my own imagination:

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 and stoically dignified aristocrat Leon Feiner and the highly emotional Menachem Kirschenbaum is well documented in Karski’s book. While our simple-stage techniques couldn’t permit us to fully reenact the atmosphere of that room in our touring production since we performed mostly in lecture halls with no set and minimal props and costume pieces, creating that atmosphere became the task of the talented actors and director.

My Act One ends after Feiner helps Karski enter the Warsaw Ghetto disguised as a Jew. Old Karski describes his experiences visiting the hell on earth of the Jews walled in and starving. He details an incident that took place in his first visit to the Jewish Ghetto: his encounter with a starving young Jewish boy, an image that – according to Kaya Mirecka-Ploss, Karski’s best friend and confidante during the last years of his life -- haunted Karski for the rest of his life. This event is so painful to Karski that he refuses to talk about it on camera. The interview with Lanzmann is then interrupted when his wife, Pola Nirenska, a noted choreographer and the love of Karski’s life, enters to serve them lunch, only to learn that Karski has broken his vow not to speak with anyone (including each other) about the war years by agreeing to this interview. This vow was made because Pola, a Polish Jew, lost brothers and sisters in the war, which led to the pact between them. She is furious at this violation of his promise to her.

Before I proceed to Act Two, I must relate a quick story. My talks with Kaya became one of the most important sources for my play. She had an impeccable memory and was privy to information about Karski that no one else knew and, through her, I gleaned valuable information for my play. After she read a draft that included what she had told me by phone, I asked – holding my breath -- if there was anything in the draft that wasn’t accurate. She did not smile and said, “One thing.” I was terrified: how had I screwed up? She then revealed something not in any of my Karski sources, “Karski’s wife Pola would never serve them lunch in their home. When she was a broke choreographer in England before she met Karski, she washed dishes to survive. After they were married, she had Karski promise they’d never eat at home so she’d never have to wash another dish again. So the two ate out for every meal, so, Kaia said, my having Pola serve Karski and Lanzmann lunch was the play’s only inaccuracy. Her comment

motivated me to I tweak the original from her making lunch to her ordering in lunch so she wouldn't necessarily have to wash dishes. I was relieved to keep the lunch in some form since it services as a structural device separating Acts One and Two.

In any event, the action of Act Two begins with the resumption of the interview as Karski is being filmed talking about his experience disguised as a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto. The historical record shows he visited the Ghetto twice but I compress the two visits into one to keep the action flowing and to avoid repetition. But by doing so, I have lost something important about Karski's courage and risk in my making this necessary plot elision which is, Karski's heroism in returning to the Ghetto a second time to get as full and accurate an eye-witness account as possible so that his testimony to Western leaders, who at the time were still oblivious of Hitler's genocidal "final solution," would be that much weightier and more believable. It was illegal for an Aryan to go into the walled off ghetto so Karski would have been instantly shot if he were caught. So the risk was enormous. But also, going back and witnessing the horrors after already knowing what he would witness again – the suffering, the knowledge that a terrible doom lay in wait for all of them – was another aspect of his extraordinary courage in returning a second time.

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 camp – one called Izbica. Karski agreed to this, despite the risks. He would enter disguised as a guard. When Karski describes this in his 1944 book *The Story of a Secret State*, he mentions how he entered Izbica disguised as an Estonian guard. Because the war was still going on and he did not want to endanger the lives of those who helped him, he purposely misidentified the

guards as Estonian rather than as Ukrainian. The updated edition of his book includes a note that corrects this. My play includes the corrected identification.

The emotional high point of his experience here is seeing the Jews loaded into trains and hearing later what they faced inside the cars themselves, especially when the cars were cruelly abandoned to allow the occupants to trample over one another and starve miserably even before they arrived at the awaiting concentration camp. Instead of having Karski provide the account of these atrocities at the first time he testified historically, I purposely delay it to one of the later times he testified about his Izbica visit. Historically he gave oral testimony a couple of times in England, then in America, sometimes in its entirety, sometimes in a shortened version. In the United States he gave a full account to Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, the highest-ranking Jewish official in the government and, a tragically curtailed one to Roosevelt. For obvious dramaturgical reasons I did not want to repeat the story with each of his testimonies. I chose to give the fullest account in my play to Justice Felix Frankfurter. I made that choice to drive home the irony that Frankfurter's disturbing response of disbelief of what Karski had actually seen came from a Jew. Even for a non-Jew to respond with disbelief at what the Jews were subjected to in the Warsaw Ghetto and in concentration camps is surprising from our perspective today. Frankfurter's reaction was for me, a fellow Jew, one of the play's emotional and thematic high points (*or maybe it is better to say, low points...*).

But the true climax of the play comes at the end of the play when we see the tragedy of Jan Karski in its culminating emotional expression, when he breaks down entirely, berating himself mercilessly for not having succeeded at stopping the Holocaust. While this breakdown did not occur exactly as it does in the play, in front of the French filmmaker, Kaia Mirecka-Ploss verified that I succeeded at capturing his mental instability and deep inner despair over what he

perceived as his failure, his mission *unaccomplished*, leaving him with a despair he carried with him to his grave.

Doing research for *Coming to See Aunt Sophie* taught me not only about Holocaust hero Karski, but also, more generally, about a particular kind of courage I hope is not lost as people read, watch, or hear my play. Much is written about heroes who fight for people of their own kind: Americans risking their lives for fellow Americans, as in wars -- or Jews risking their lives for fellow Jews, as in the failed wartime uprisings in the Warsaw Ghetto or another less celebrated but just as unsuccessful ghetto uprising in my ancestral home of Bialystok. While I do not minimize that form of heroism, the Karski kind is different. His was the courage to stand up for the other. Karski taught me how one man can be capable of choosing to risk his life to stop injustice against a people outside one's own community, in Karski's case, not for fellow Catholic Poles, but for Jewish people living in Poland. It may be said that Jews were part of Karski's extended family in his marrying Pola Nirenska, a Jewish woman, but it is important to note he did so many years after his World War II heroics. It can also be said that the Jews he risked all to save were fellow Poles and therefore not the "other," for many Poles at the time Jews were widely viewed as people apart, as outsiders living in their own closed communities, who just happened to be residing in Poland. Karski did not see them that way -- for him they were not "other"; they were fellow Poles and, more fundamentally, fellow human beings -- thereby meriting his personal risk and sacrifice, incurring for him great personal cost, one that lasted his entire life. He suffered one kind of despair as a young courier living through what his job required him to see and another kind as an old professor, enduring his own self-examination and judgment. He may not have succeeded at stopping the Holocaust, but for his herculean wartime efforts and his later self-inflicted self-reckoning, we should stand humbled, grateful and inspired.

ANNOTATED AND SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR THE PLAY

- 1) *The Story of a Secret State* – by Jan Karski -- buy the revised edition (2010, 2013) since the notes at the back correct many of the inaccuracies Karski deliberately used to protect his friends when he wrote the book before the war had ended. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Foreword in the revised edition begins with the code phrase Karski used to make his way through Nazi-occupied Europe: "Coming to See Aunt Sophie" my title.
- 2) *Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust* co-written by Thomas Wood and Stanislaw Jankowski – I found this book to be very helpful in filling in some gaps left out of Karski's own accounts. I was honored to have Thomas Wood attend the play's American premiere at Crossroads Repertory Theatre in Terre Haute.
- 3) *Jan Karski: Photobiography*. By Maciej Sadowski. Valuable for actors performing in *Coming to See Aunt Sophie* who might like to see actual photographs of historical people who are among the characters that they play.
- 4) My conversations on the phone and in person with Kaia Mirecka-Ploss, Karski's longtime close friend, neighbor, and personal confidante.
- 5) Actual interviews of Jan Karski can be found on Youtube. Most are from Lanzmann interviews for the film *Shoah*. There are others available but the most stirring and intriguing ones are with Lanzmann. I have listed them below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpg-wFJFxRQ> – Karski's emotional struggle trying to speak at the beginning of interview with Lanzmann

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YVTfG_qE2Y – His meeting with Frankfurter

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paP02Us8CyM> – His meeting with FDR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHJ7TI3qqjU> – His meeting with Ziegelboym

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCs4gYJB1OI> – His experience in the transit camp at Izbica, Part One

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHJ7TI3qqjU> – His experience in the transit camp at Izbica, Part Two