

COMING TO SEE AUNT SOPHIE

A Play in Two Acts
Based on the Life of Jan Karski

By Arthur Feinsod

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CHARACTERS:

- OLD KARSKI.....64 years old. He is a dignified professor of political science at Georgetown University dressed in suit and tie. He has a Polish accent.
- YOUNG KARSKI.....Jan Karski, between ages 12 and 29. His Polish accent is thicker than that of OLD KARSKI.
- MALE AND FEMALE OTHERS....They play a variety of characters of different ages on stage, with appropriate accents. When they are not playing roles, they sit in their respective benches as historical witnesses: watching, waiting to judge.
 - MO1.....middle age actor (about 40), handsome and charismatic.
 - MO2.....also about 40 but more of a character actor.
 - FO 1.....older actress than FO 2, about 50.
 - FO2.....young and attractive, about 25.

TIME: A day in 1978 and various times between the years 1926 and 1943.

PLACE: The study in the home of Jan Karski and Pola Nirenska near Georgetown U. Flashback scenes throughout Europe and finally in Washington D.C.

SETTING: DSR is a comfortable armed chair, which is generally where OLD KARSKI sits for his interview. At times he watches the past so closely he seems to join it. DSL is a similar chair but without arms; that is YOUNG KARSKI’s home base though he roams the space throughout. Scattered around the rest of the stage are pieces of basic wooden furniture that suggests Europe and the 1940’s: wooden chairs, a table, benches, single bed, perhaps a stool.

PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTE: This play is written for a “poor theater” style with little scenery and no technology beyond lights to help focus the action. The characters played by MO1 and 2 and FO1 and 2 should have basic costumes suggesting the 1940’s on which they add minimally to create different characters: a hat, glasses, scarf and/or simple hand props. The more the show utilizes few objects, the faster the action can move and the more it parallels the courier’s life, which requires possessing nothing. Accents play a vital part in helping distinguish the characters and need to be carefully differentiated and executed. The number of actors playing MO1 and FO2 is expandable to three males/two females or shrinkable to one male/one female. Producers and directors who prefer the smaller or larger cast options should contact the playwright’s agent Ms. Tonda Marton.

To depict the life of Jan Karski, a variety of historical sources were consulted, including his own *Story of a Secret State*; E. Thomas Wood and Stanislaw M. Jankowki’s *Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust*; interviews of Karski such as ones for the film Shoah; documents in the Karski archives Stanford University’s Hoover Institution; and interviews, including Kaya Mirecka-Ploss, his closest friend and confidante in the last years of his life (he died in 2000). Although poetic license is occasionally taken for purposes of dramatic structure, narrative flow and aesthetic economy, the overriding concern has been to stay faithful to the historic record.

ACT TWO

(It is after lunch, the camera is rolling. OLD KARSKI picks up where he left off. He is at his chair, SR, facing the camera. As these events are described below, we see FEINER putting on armbands with a yellow star of David on YOUNG KARSKI's and his own arm. We also watch as FEINER transforms in coordination with OLD KARSKI's description. Then the two look out, seeing what OLD KARSKI describes in the Ghetto.)

OLD KARSKI

There was a building at the edge of the ghetto that faced the Aryan part of the city. We snuck in and went to the basement where a tunnel had been dug linking it to a building in the ghetto. We went through the tunnel and found ourselves in an apartment in the Ghetto. As we were about to emerge, Feiner put this armband on me so I would look like any other Jew there. Then he amazed me when he transformed before my very eyes, going from a noble-looking Polish aristocrat to a withered desperate Jew so he wouldn't stand out... What I saw was horrible. Dead bodies in the street. Starved mothers with their babies trying to give milk from breasts that were flat and empty, nothing to give. In a corner here and there children playing or...it was not really playing.. going through motions of playing. This was not humanity. Everybody, out on the street, running like automatons; the children were taught to run— zig zag— I didn't know why until later. People begging. One holding two onions, one a plate, cookies, trying to sell but no one had any money. They were going through movements of a ghost life but this was no life.

FEINER (MO1)

(To YOUNG KARSKI beside him.)

Remember this! Remember this!

YOUNG KARSKI

That man over there, that old man. Is he dead?

FEINER (MO1)

No he is dying. Watch...

(Softer now.)

Remember this!

OLD KARSKI

Oh my guide, my Virgil. Little did you know how little you needed to say that...

(Suddenly OLD KARSKI perks up as he remembers something big.)

Then, suddenly, everybody scatters, like putting a foot in the middle of a school of minnows. Everybody...scatters away. Feiner sees something in the distance, he grabs my arm and rushes me towards a building. He knocks on the door.

(MO1 knocks hard on the door.)

FEINER (MO1)

Let us in. Hurry. We are Jews.

(The door opens. An OLD JEWISH WOMAN, FO1, greets them with a nod. She seems to know FEINER. They go past her. MO1 points to window. YOUNG KARSKI goes to it.)

FEINER (MO1)

Get down!... Now look for yourself.

(YOUNG KARSKI, crouching, looks out window, OLD JEWISH WOMAN behind. YOUNG KARSKI stares, horrified, as the scene, described by OLD KARSKI, unfolds. MO1 and MO2 are the two Hitlerjugend.)

OLD KARSKI

I look down and see two handsome young men in Nazi uniforms, Hitlerjugend. Big contrast to the Jews.

(MO1 and MO2 act out what OLD KARSKI describes.)

Well-fed, cocky, smiling, chatting among themselves, pushing each other in spasms of merriment. Suddenly one of them, smiles at the other, this may be the right moment. He grabs his gun, shoots through a window into one of the buildings.

MO1

(Making ugly sound of the shooter's demonic pleasure as he shoots.)

Ahhh!

(FO2 claps to create the sound of the gun shot. OLD KARSKI screams at the moment she claps. YOUNG KARSKI jumps, then lets out a reflect soft scream right after the scream, in empathetic response. MO1 and MO2 congratulate on another.)

OLD KARSKI

They called this the "Jew Hunt." Obviously from the sound they hit someone inside the apartment. They smile...congratulate each other...They keep walking...waiting for another opportunity to shoot. This is why the children are taught to run zig zag.

(OLD KARSKI starts to breakdown emotionally. It is unclear whether or not he can continue. But then he steels himself to do so.)

An old Jewish woman behind me saw what I saw. She seemed to realize then that I was not just another Jew from the Ghetto. I will never forget her.

OLD JEWISH WOMAN (FO1)

(She hugs YOUNG KARSKI and with selfless empathy for him.)

There's nothing you can do, dear. Go now. Go.

(YOUNG KARSKI pauses to look at her, then runs out.)

OLD KARSKI

Once we were alone, Feiner kept saying this same thing to me:

FEINER (MO1)

Remember this. Tell them!...Tell them!

YOUNG KARSKI

I will report this to everyone who will listen.

OLD KARSKI

When we got to a safe location, Feiner turned to me with another idea...

FEINER (MO1)

Before you leave for England, you must see a concentration camp.

YOUNG KARSKI

What?... How is that even possible?

FEINER (MO1)

I have ways...I will make it as safe as possible. The risks are still great. Are you willing?

YOUNG KARSKI

(Without hesitation.)

Yes.

OLD KARSKI

Feiner received information that there was a camp that was chaotic, where someone could possibly sneak in and sneak out undetected. It was not really a concentration camp but rather a holding station on the way to a concentration camp. Izbica it was called, after the town it was in. If Jews didn't die there, they were transported to final destination camps close by. Many died in transit.

(A beat. YOUNG KARSKI stands, waiting anxiously and looking for his guide.)

Izbica was run by Ukrainian guards. Feiner got word there was a guard with sympathy toward Jews. Feiner bribed him to stay home sick so I could get his uniform and papers. I would pick them up at a store nearby. We were met by another Ukrainian guard who led me in through the gate. After all arrangements were made, I bid Feiner good-bye. I remember watching him leave. His dignity. I never saw him again...Feiner...Great name. I never met a braver finer man.

(YOUNG KARSKI wears a cap which is a distinctive part of the uniform. UKRAINIAN GUIDE speaks softly, watching to make sure no one notices them.)

UKRAINIAN GUIDE (MO2)

Follow behind me but never too close. And whatever you do, do NOT go anywhere near any other Ukrainian guard. We all know each other and if they see a stranger in one of their uniforms, they will report you, no question.

YOUNG KARSKI

(Without hesitation.)

Let's go.

(They walk around the UC prop table and they are now in Izbica.)

UKRAINIAN GUIDE (MO2)

On the other side of this wall, the Jews will be moving quickly, frantic. Crying, screaming. Just follow in my direction. Look left and right, only to avoid bumping into people, not as if you are looking to see. They will spot that. We will head to where the trains are loaded. Keep your eyes on me, I will be ahead. Don't walk close to me.

(Silence. MO2 and YOUNG KARSKI walk in place. OLD KARSKI seems reluctant to continue but then steels himself to go on. MO2 leaves YOUNG KARSKI, who now is alone, looking around in painful shock at what he is observing.)

OLD KARSKI

Once in the camp I heard a sound I will never forget, a cacophony of wailing, crying and shouting, frightening to hear. I could have prayed for deafness right then. In Izbica I was the closest I have come to death itself. Not just people dying, but the spirit of death, everywhere. I was suddenly Orpheus, coming to Hades but there was no Eurydice to lead out, no purpose but to stop myself from going crazy and charging a guard or throwing off my uniform and announcing I am a Jew or just screaming until someone shot me. The camp was crowded with starving people who were far more desperate, more at a feverish pitch than those in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Jews had been there several days without food or water and were crazed with despair, insane rage, reduced to naked savages on the very edge of survival. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Old men, women, little children. Naked, crazy. No begging now. Running now this way, now that way, knowing there was no way to go. Then the guards start corralling them for the trip to the trains, hitting people on their heads, their sides with butts of rifles. The guards seemed bored, indifferent, except once in a while they shot into the air, causing a flurry of activity. Then once in a while they shot into a crowd and I would see an old man or a child fall down, bleeding, dying, dead. When I finally saw the loading of the trains, I realized, the ones being shot, they were the lucky ones.

(Silence. OLD KARSKI sits in his chair, unable to continue.)

FILMMAKER (MO1)

(Having put on the scarf that identifies him.)

What happened at the trains?

OLD KARSKI

No, that I cannot speak about. I cannot, I am sorry. These are my permanent possessions. There is nothing I would like better than to forget what I saw in Izbica. Maybe I talk about it later. I can't now... Watching the loading of the trains put me over the edge. I went crazy... that is the only way to describe it.

(YOUNG KARSKI, who is watching all this time, starts to breathe strangely, painfully, as if about to have a seizure, strange sounds like a tortured animal.)

UKRAINIAN GUIDE (MO2)

(In a desperate whisper.)

What is wrong with you? Stop that, are you crazy? You are drawing attention to yourself, us. You'll get both of us killed.

(UKRAINIAN GUIDE shakes him, then slaps him surreptitiously. This seems to have done the trick. YOUNG KARSKI seems better in control.)

Let's get out of here, quick.

(They go around the UC prop table once again: they are now outside the Izbica camp. They suggestively enact what OLD KARSKI describes below.)

OLD KARSKI

We rushed to the gate, walking quickly, not running. The frantic frenzied movements of the crowd helped disguise our movements which were nothing like those of the other guards. After we got through the gate, the Ukrainian guard quickly ran away from me not wanting anything more to do with me. I ran back to the store where I was given the uniform. And then I did very strange things. I took off all my clothes and, with the uniform laying at my feet, washed myself entirely, creating a flood of water coming through the bathroom door. The owner ran up to me.

STORE OWNER (FO1)

What's wrong with you? You're creating a flood and ruining my store.

YOUNG KARSKI

I was dirty, very dirty.

STORE OWNER (FO1)

(Picks up a piece of his clothing and shoves it to the mid-section of YOUNG KARSKI.)
Take this and get out, right now, you lunatic. It serves me right...taking bribes from Jews.

OLD KARSKI

(YOUNG KARSKI goes through these actions as they are described.)

Then the miracle. I was standing covering myself, shivering, and I decided it was time to end it. The cyanide pills were given to me to end torture and what I had seen was the worse torture, worse than anything ever done to my body. I reached down to a secret part of me, a place where I had taped the tiny box after my friend Stefa gave it to me. I opened the box but, to my surprise, it was not pills at all but a small communion wafer, placed there so delicately, lovingly. That priest had taught me the most valuable lesson of my life. I put the wafer back in the tiny box and decided I would wear it around my neck to the end of my mission. I never again asked for cyanide. This was truly a message from God.

(Reaches under his shirt, takes off a simple gold necklace with a tiny box attached.)
...still hanging around my neck.

(He smiles and looks out.)

I guess my mission is not over yet...Soon after I left the camp, Zofia met me on the street. She caught up with me and was waving a magazine.

(FOI, as ZOFIA, runs on waving a ripped-out magazine article. YOUNG KARSKI runs to meet her, taking hold of the article.)

YOUNG KARSKI

Is this the article that is getting you into so much trouble?

(ZOFIA smiles broadly.)

ZOFIA (FO1)

(Broadcasting this, YOUNG KARSKI trying to quiet her.)

Yes, my dear friend! Read it. Read it out loud. Read it everywhere. I want people to know what I wrote.

(In a more intimate voice.)

Skip to the parts I underlined.

OLD KARSKI

It did not arrive in time to be included in the key I was delivering to England, so I memorized it.

(Reciting this by memory while YOUNG KARSKI, looking at the magazine, mouths the words.)

“The Jews are dying in the thousands surrounded by Pontius Pilates who wash their hands of it. The world looks on--”

(OLD KARSKI stops. He is emotionally wrought and cannot continue. To camera, front.)

OLD KARSKI

Sorry, Zofia died eight years ago. I guess the wound feels fresh.

YOUNG KARSKI

(To OLD KARSKI.)

Come on, Grandpa! Where is your old strength?

OLD KARSKI

Yes my strength.

(YOUNG KARSKI moves his mouth as if reading aloud from the magazine, OLD KARSKI recites it from memory.)

“The world looks on and says nothing, does nothing. We can no longer tolerate this silence. We have no right to remain passive in the face of these crimes. Whoever remains silent after witnessing a murder becomes the murderer’s accomplice. Those who do not condemn give their consent.”

ZOFIA (FO1)

That’ll make them think twice when they turn their backs, pretend not to see.

YOUNG KARSKI

You are shaming the world. Good. The world needs to be shamed.

ZOFIA (FO1)

This isn't a time for politeness, my dear friend. We must hit them between the eyes.

(YOUNG KARSKI smiles and puts the article in his pocket.)

YOUNG KARSKI

I will memorize every word, every comma.

(ZOFIA gives him another big hug.)

MO2

October and November 1942, Karski Travels Through a Dangerous Europe, with a Key

(MO 2 throws KARSKI the key, he catches it, puts it in his pocket and runs off.)

OLD KARSKI

I won't bore you with the details of my trip. People think being a courier is exciting, dramatic. In reality, it is very boring. You watch everything, you wait. You keep quiet, you try to blend in, except when I had that dental get-up that the Underground gave me so people wouldn't hear my Polish accent when I talked French. I successfully made it through Germany, had a close call or two in France, another in Belgium, but the trip was thankfully uneventful. By the time I was in Spain I lost my dental work-up but the Underground insisted I have a French woman pose as my fiancée.

(YOUNG KARSKI walks on with, FO2 on his arm. They smile at one another.)

SPANISH CONDUCTOR (MO1)

(With a terrible Spanish accent he tries to cover with some Spanish words.)

Your ticket, por favor? Who are you traveling to see?

YOUNG KARSKI

I am coming to see Aunt Sophie.

SPANISH CONDUCTOR (MO1)

Anyone coming to see Aunt Sophie is all right by me. Have a seat.

(YOUNG KARSKI and FO2 sit as if in a train seat.)

So, de donde...Ah. Where are you from?

KARSKI'S FRENCH FIANCEE (FO2)

From Paris.

SPANISH CONDUCTOR (MO1)

No, Canada.

(Puzzled, she turns to YOUNG KARSKI. CONDUCTOR to YOUNG KARSKI.)

Where are you from?

YOUNG KARSKI

I am from Poland.

SPANISH CONDUCTOR (MO1)

Gee whiz! CANADA, you idiot!

YOUNG KARSKI

What?

SPANISH CONDUCTOR (MO1)

You are from Canada. Both of you, from Canada!

(FO2 and YOUNG KARSKI look at each other perplexed. Keeping his Spanish accent.)

Por Dios, didn't they tell you? If Canadians are arrested in Spain, the Spanish authorities extradite them to the British...Get it?...

(Overly pronounced.)

The British?...

(The two smile and nod. CONDUCTOR tests them, fiercely.)

So where are you from?