

I'm embarrassed to say it was only the late 1990s when I first heard about Jan Karski. He was the guest speaker at a Holocaust Memorial Program in San Francisco. Billed as the man who tried to stop the Holocaust, his story was at the same time intensely moving and outrageous. Intensely moving because of how hard he worked to stop the Shoah and outrageous because it will outrage any sane person who hears it.

Mr. Karski, the youngest of 8 children from a Roman Catholic family in Lodz, Poland, was one of those unique individuals who knew right from wrong instinctively and was willing to put his life on the line countless times to do the right thing.

He was in the Polish army when Germany invaded. As a liaison officer of the Polish underground, he carried intelligence information to the Polish Exile Government in London. Not only was he captured and tortured by the Nazis, barely escaping, he also snuck into the Warsaw Ghetto and a Concentration Camp to gain firsthand knowledge of what was happening to the Jews.

In 1942, he was approached by two Jewish leaders of the underground movement and asked to tell world leaders, especially Churchill and Roosevelt what was happening to the Jews. They told him almost 2 million Jews had already been killed and that 300,000 of the half million Jews jammed into the Warsaw Ghetto had been deported to a death camp.

In the Ghetto and Death Camp, his photographic memory was a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he could give specific information about what was happening and a curse because he could never forget the horror that he saw.

In the movie 'Shoah,' Mr. Karski told about the Ghetto—naked dead bodies lying in the streets; emaciated and starving people; listless children with expressionless eyes. He saw two teen-aged members of Hitler Youth cheering and laughing at the screams of agony as they shot Jews for sport.

As he watched these horrors, the man with him kept saying, 'Remember this, remember this.' As if he could ever forget it.

One of the men said to him: 'Let not a single leader of the United Nations be able to say that they did not know we were being murdered ... and could not be helped except from the outside.'

In the town of Izbica, a stopping place for Jews on their way to the Belzec extermination camp, it was, of course, unspeakably worse.

Karski collected and brought all this information to his contacts in London and the United States.

In his secret meeting with British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, in February 1943, Karski was told that Great Britain had already done enough by accepting 100,000 refugees.

In July 1943 Karski arrived in the U.S.

His secret meeting with Roosevelt didn't go much better than the one with Eden. He later found out that because of his meeting with Roosevelt, the War Refugee Board, a Federal agency that helped settle surviving Jews, was established. A small concession given the magnitude of the problem.

He said about his experiences:

'Almost every individual was sympathetic to my reports concerning the Jews. But when I reported to the leaders of governments they discarded their conscience, their personal feeling. They provided a rationale which seemed valid. What was the

situation? The Jews were totally helpless. The war strategy was the military defeat of Germany and the defeat of Germany's war potential for all eternity. Nothing could interfere with the military crushing of the Third Reich. The Jews had no country, no government. They were fighting but they had no identity.'

Karski eventually settled in the US, married a Jewish woman who had lost her entire family during the war, earned his doctorate at Georgetown and taught there until 1984.

He said, 'The Lord assigned me a role to speak and write during the war when—as it seemed to me—it might help. It did not ...' He further said that the sin was committed through commission, or omission, or self-imposed ignorance, or insensitivity, or self-interest, or hypocrisy, or heartless rationalization... This sin will haunt humanity to the end of time. It does haunt me. And I want it to be so.'

Now you understand why I called his story intensely moving and outrageous. It's outrageous that those world leaders who knew what was happening as early as 1943 allowed so many Jews to go to their death without lifting a hand. When I saw him 15 years ago, more than 40 years after his heroic stance, he was still bitter and angry that his words did not move leaders to action.

On Sunday we will meet a man who survived by the courage of people like Jan Karski, people who didn't have to lift a hand to save Jews and they did. When we commemorate the Shoah this weekend, not only do we think of the 6 million of our people but of the righteous people who made sure it wasn't any more.

Shabbat Shalom.