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# JAN KARSKI, AUSCHWITZ AND NEWS OF THE HOLOCAUST

## INTRODUCTION

Jan Karski acted as an emissary for the Polish Government in Exile and carried important reports from Warsaw to the West during the Second World War: in 1940 (to Angers) and in 1942 (to Paris)<sup>1</sup>. This paper focuses on Karski's 1942 mission from Warsaw to London – the mission for which the man is famous. According to the now well-rehearsed account, Karski carried information about the Nazi anti-Jewish programme and spoke about what was happening to Jews in Poland to British, Polish and Jewish representatives in London. In the eyes of Jankowski and Wood, Karski's dissemination of news from Poland, including to various officials, made him „one man who tried to stop the Holocaust”, and contributed to the Polish History Museum and the Jan Karski Educational Foundation claiming that Karski was *Humanity's Hero*<sup>2</sup>.

In 2005, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Polish foreign minister Władysław Bartoszewski declared that:

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<sup>1</sup> In 1942, Karski passed the material from Warsaw to the head of Polish intelligence in Paris prior to continuing his journey to Gibraltar and then to London. It is not known how, exactly, Karski's material reached London.

<sup>2</sup> E. T. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski. How one man tried to stop the Holocaust*, New York, 1994; Internet sites: [Jankarski.net/en](http://Jankarski.net/en); [Google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/jan-karski-humanity-s-hero%C2%AE/QR\\_UaCtP?position=0%2C24](http://Google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/jan-karski-humanity-s-hero%C2%AE/QR_UaCtP?position=0%2C24), last accessed 7 IX 2013.

*The Polish resistance movement kept informing and alerting the free world to the situation. In the last quarter of 1942, thanks to the Polish emissary Jan Karski and his mission, and also by other means, the Governments of the United Kingdom and of the United States were well-informed about what was going on in Auschwitz-Birkenau<sup>3</sup>.*

This declaration is at odds with the scholarly literature on the Western knowledge of the Nazi genocide of Europe's Jews at Auschwitz. Although scholars such as Richard Breitman and Barbara Rogers have challenged Martin Gilbert's contention that the Allies first knew of the genocide taking place at Auschwitz with the distribution of the Vrba-Wetzler report in June of 1944, neither Breitman nor Rogers located any evidence that Jan Karski played a role in advising Western leaders that Auschwitz was the location of mass killing of Jews<sup>4</sup>.

Indeed, information that scholars consider to have been carried by Karski from Warsaw in the autumn of 1942 was published in the „Polish Fortnightly Review” in early December 1942, in the British press and in the 10 December 1942 Polish Government note to allied Governments. No information about the genocide of Jews at Auschwitz was published by the press in December 1942. It is therefore odd that Bartoszewski chose to claim that Jan Karski played a role in informing the world about what was going on in Auschwitz-Birkenau, rather than, for example, the Warsaw Ghetto or the camp Karski thought was Bełżec, but was in reality Izbica, when scholarship on Western knowledge of Auschwitz suggests that Karski played no role in disseminating information about the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz. Has scholarship on both Karski and Western knowledge of Auschwitz missed some important information?

On the one hand, available material on Karski's 1942 mission does show some surprising gaps. For example, it is not known when, exactly, Karski left Warsaw in the late summer or the early autumn of 1942. Outstanding questions include the following, amongst others: What was the extent of Karski's knowledge of the Nazi genocide of Jews? What exactly did Karski carry west? How did the reports that Karski allegedly passed on to Polish intelligence in Paris in October 1942 reach London and when? What was the precise nature of the assistance given by British and American intelligence operatives during his journey? Why is there no documentary record of Karski discussing the mass murder of Jews at Auschwitz<sup>5</sup>?

<sup>3</sup> W. Bartoszewski, „A wolny świat nie reagował”. Przemówienie wygłoszone w 60. rocznicę wyzwolenia Auschwitz, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 28 I 2005, available at the URI: [Wyborcza.pl/1,88332,4938767.html](http://Wyborcza.pl/1,88332,4938767.html), last accessed 13 IX 2013. Also see: [C-spanvideo.org/program/185321-1](http://C-spanvideo.org/program/185321-1), last accessed 13 IX 2013. This is a video of the commemorations marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the camp. Karski is mentioned 6 minutes 20 seconds into the video.

<sup>4</sup> R. Breitman, *Allied Knowledge of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943–1944*, in: *FDR and the Holocaust*, ed. V. Newton, New York, 1996, p. 175–182; idem, *Official Secrets. What the Nazis planned, what the British and Americans knew*, London, 1999; M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, London, 1981; B. Rogers, *British Intelligence and the Holocaust. Auschwitz and the Allies Re-examined*, „The Journal of Holocaust Education”, 1999, 8, 1, p. 89–106.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion on Karski's 1942 mission see E. T. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski...* Also see A. Żbikowski, *Karski*, Warszawa, 2011; J. Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, London, 2012; J. Karski, M. Wie-

On the other hand, some accounts of Karski's 1942 mission inflate its significance<sup>6</sup>. A full consideration of the contemporary significance of Karski's 1942 mission and the tasks to which it is now being put is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the current exploitation of particular accounts of that mission and the information which Karski brought to London is possible because of some gaps in knowledge about his mission, as indicated above, and due to insufficient historical contextualisation of his 1942 mission.

First, little attention has been paid to the fact that the news of the Holocaust was sent from Warsaw repeatedly in the late summer and autumn of 1942 – more on this below. Second, little effort has been expended to understand how the data that Karski probably carried (which arrived in London before he did in November 1942) „fitted” into the discourse about the Holocaust that was developing in London during October and November of 1942. Third, insufficient attention has been paid to how the timing of Karski's arrival influenced the discourse about atrocities against Jews in London in November and December 1942, and how that discourse influenced the way Karski was received in London<sup>7</sup>.

Given that news of the Warsaw Ghetto and Bełżec was circulating in London before Karski's arrival in November 1942, it is important to historicise the significance of Karski's 1942 mission within the broader context of news about the Holocaust that arrived through the war and to recognise that Karski was but one of many couriers (emissaries) who traversed the occupied Europe and delivered reports, including those related to the Holocaust, to the Western allies. Couriers were part of a complex underground network which functioned to ensure information

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rzyński, *Emisariusz własnymi słowami. Zapis rozmów przeprowadzonych w latach 1995–1997 w Waszyngtonie emitowanych w Głosie Ameryki*, Warszawa, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> A conference entitled „Jan Karski – Witness, Emissary, Man”, which took place in Zamość in November 2013 and was supported by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declared in its publicity that Karski was *the first to inform the Allies about the tragedy of European Jews*, that Karski travelled to London and Washington to tell world leaders about what he has seen and that it was thanks to Karski that the world first learned about the Holocaust. None of these claims are true. The tragedy of European Jews was already known. In July 1942, a conference at the British Ministry of Information in London drew attention to the organised slaughter of Jews by the Nazis and the use of poison gas. Karski's main mission was to tell the Allies about the broad situation in Poland. Delivering news of what was happening to Jews was not the focus of his mission.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that information about the Holocaust arrived in London during the first half of 1942. For example, reports from Warsaw were often taken to Stockholm and then flown on a regular RAF flight to London. Sven Norrman, a Swedish courier who co-operated with the Polish Underground, delivered the important Bund report to Stockholm in May 1942. News of the Holocaust also arrived in London through 1943 and 1944 too. Napoleon Segieda delivered news of the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz and reported what he knew to Ignacy Schwarzbart in April 1943. Schwarzbart, in turn, informed Jewish representatives in Britain, Palestine and the United States. The activities of most couriers have not attracted a great deal of popular or indeed scholarly attention. See J. Lewandowski, *A fish breaks through the net. Sven Norrman and the Holocaust*, „Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry”, 2001, 14, p. 295–305.

from Poland reached the West. Specific reports were often sent west multiple times via different routes<sup>8</sup>.

In the first section, this paper draws the reader's attention to the information about the Holocaust that was known in London prior to Karski's arrival and discusses how this information was circulated and understood. It highlights the way the British sought to control the dissemination of news about the atrocities in general and those against Jews in particular. In the second section, the paper focuses on Karski's 1942 mission. It examines what information about the Holocaust that Karski could have been aware of was circulating in Warsaw in the late summer of 1942. The reports that were sent west from Warsaw during the late summer and early autumn of 1942 are put into focus. The document argues that it is important not to conflate the contents of those reports with Karski's activities in London if one wishes to come to an understanding of Karski's knowledge and possible dissemination of news of the Nazi mass murder of Jews at Auschwitz.

## CHOREOGRAPHING THE NEWS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN BRITAIN

Although news of the Nazis' anti-Jewish programme reached London from the occupied Poland through 1940 and 1941, this information was not given a great deal of publicity. Already in the summer of 1941, Churchill had been advised of the Nazi practice of open-air mass shooting in Eastern Poland and Western USSR, through the work of intelligence operatives at Bletchley Park<sup>9</sup>. In January 1942, the St. James Palace Conference on atrocities did not highlight the Nazis' anti-Jewish policy, and through the first half of 1942, little was published or broadcast in Britain on the Nazi violence and mass-murder of Jews. However, in June and July of 1942, following the receipt of the Bund information that reported 700 000 Jews to have perished in Poland, information about the Holocaust was published and broadcast by the British media.

On June 9, 1942, the Polish Prime Minister, Władysław Sikorski, reported in a broadcast on the BBC's European Service that the Germans sought to kill all Jews. The Polish National Council resolution of July 7, 1942, highlighted „the planned slaughter of practically the whole Jewish population”. Both Sikorski and the Polish National Council had identified that the Nazis had a programme to exterminate European Jews. British and American officials did not publically echo Sikorski's and the Polish National Council's view in the summer or the autumn of 1942. How-

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<sup>8</sup> Karski claimed he left Warsaw in October 1942. However, Polish intelligence messages between Warsaw, Bern and London all point to the fact that Karski left Warsaw in September 1942. See J. Karski, *Letter of Jan Karski to Daniel Grinberg*, in: *Holocaust fifty years after*, ed. D. Grinberg, [Warszawa, 1994].

<sup>9</sup> M. Smith, *Bletchley Park and the Holocaust*, in: *Understanding Intelligence in the Twentieth Century. Journeys in Shadows*, ed. L. V. Scott, P. D. Jackson, London, 2004, p. 116.

ever, the notion of a genocidal plan was certainly circulating in wartime London. The Polish National Council resolution was published in English in 1942<sup>10</sup>.

News of Sobibór and Bełżec was publicised in July 1942. The British Ministry of Information hosted a conference in which the British Minister of Information told his audience that 700 000 Jews had been murdered in Poland. However, after a flurry of reports, more often than not tucked on the inside pages of British newspapers in late June and early July of 1942, news of the Holocaust largely disappeared from the news agenda in the West<sup>11</sup>. In part, this was due to reduced circulation of news – in Warsaw, Polish intelligence operations had been infiltrated and Poles and Swedes couriering reports out of the country had been arrested. Polish ciphers had been compromised. As a result of these breaches in security, Polish officials in London restricted the distribution of information from Poland<sup>12</sup>. The lack of news about the Holocaust during the summer of 1942 was also due to a tightening of British censorship policy. British officials at the Political Warfare Executive, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information could, for example, reiterate news already in hand, make efforts to seek out further information or publicise the news that arrived from non-Polish sources. These options were not pursued.

On August 10, 1942, a telegram for the Labour MP Sydney Silverman arrived at the Foreign Office from the World Jewish Congress representative in Switzerland, Gerhard Riegner<sup>13</sup>. The Foreign Office demonstrated some lethargy in handing it over to its intended recipient and did not pass it to Silverman until August 17. Riegner reported that the Nazis aimed to annihilate Europe's Jews<sup>14</sup>.

The Foreign Office delay in passing the telegram to Silverman was due to the Foreign Office seeking to check the credibility of Riegner. Officials in the Colonial, Eastern and Refugee Departments and representatives of the Jewish Agency were all contacted. However, since the telegram was not addressed to the Foreign Office, but to a Member of Parliament, the legitimacy in delaying the delivery of the telegram to its intended recipient can be questioned.

In this context, it is worth noting that Riegner was concerned that the telegram he sent to New York, which repeated the information sent to Silverman, would not reach its intended recipient, Stephen Wise – the President of the American Jewish Congress<sup>15</sup>. The final sentence in the telegram to Silverman read: „Please inform

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<sup>10</sup> B. Bracken, *Bestiality... Unknown in any previous record of history...*, London, 1942, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, „The Daily Telegraph”, 25 VI 1942, p. 5; BBC Written Archives Centre C165 Lindley Fraser, 27 VI 1942; „Dziennik Polski”, 30 VI 1942, p. 1; „The Polish Fortnightly Review”, 1 and 15 VII 1942. For a fuller discussion of the reception of the Bund report and the dissemination of news of the Holocaust during June and July 1942, see M. Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship of the Holocaust*, Cambridge, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> D. Stola, *Early news of the Holocaust from Poland*, „Holocaust and Genocide Studies”, 1997, 11, p. 1–27.

<sup>13</sup> Mr Norton in Bern sent the telegram to the Foreign Office. See The National Archives, Kew, FO 371/30917 (92), Cypher 2831.

<sup>14</sup> The Riegner telegram is located at NA FO 371/30917 (101).

<sup>15</sup> On 17 August the State Department advised the United States representative in Bern, Leland Harrison, that Riegner's telegram was not forwarded to Wise; M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies...*, p. 58.

and consult New York”. Stephen Wise was a civilian Jewish representative and not a member of the United States Senate or House of Representatives, and therefore was not afforded the political respect which elected officials enjoyed on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Foreign Office denied Silverman the use of telephone facilities to call Stephen Wise in New York to advise him of the news. The Foreign Office also put pressure on Silverman not to act on the telegram<sup>16</sup>. The information from Riegner confirmed the view expressed in the Polish National Council’s July 7 resolution, but the British (Foreign Office) chose not to accept or publicise the news from Switzerland. It is worth pointing out that the British could have elected to officially distribute the data at any point, from August 10 onwards, but decided not to.

In the United States, the news was also not immediately disseminated. The commonly accepted view is that the delay in disseminating the data from the Riegner telegram in the United States was due to the State Department seeking to verify that data, but this is only part of the story. On October 9, Alexander Easterman, the Political Secretary of the World Jewish Congress, received a telegram from Stephen Wise, Nahum Goldmann and Maurice Perlzweig, which stated that the United States State Department „chief” (Sumner Welles) urged *postponement [of] publicity until [the] right effect [was] producible [in the] entire American press*<sup>17</sup>. The information was held up, by this account, not because the data was being confirmed, but because the State Department wished to ensure the right effect could be achieved when the data was finally approved for release. Getting news of the Holocaust to the Western Allies did not mean that it was publically disseminated in a timely fashion, or indeed at all.

In London, the Riegner telegram was circulated in the autumn of 1942 by Silverman. It was most likely a factor in Stanisław Mikołajczyk’s October 15 request that the underground in Warsaw send information about what was happening to Jews, and later encouraged Sikorski’s mention of Jews at a conference at the Albert Hall on October 29<sup>18</sup>. The Chief Rabbi, Joseph Hertz, also spoke at the Albert Hall and condemned British censorship of the Holocaust in the following manner:

*The plain man rarely saw down in black and white any attention-compelling information on these massacres. Such indifference encouraged the gorillas of Berlin to go on perfecting their technique of extermination. The British public could not show its undying hatred of all bestiality, if so much of that bestiality was carelessly screened from public knowledge*<sup>19</sup>.

Through the autumn of 1942, information about the Nazi genocide of Jews was circulating in London. The Polish underground in Warsaw gathered and sent in-

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Law, Anthony Eden’s deputy at the Foreign Office informed Silverman that [w]e have no information bearing on or confirming this story; University of Southampton, HL MS 238 /2/11, Law to Silverman, 17 VIII 1942.

<sup>17</sup> University of Southampton, HL MS 238/2/12 Wise/Goldman/Perlzweig to Easterman, 9 X 1042.

<sup>18</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (further: AAN) Warszawa, 1325 202/I-2, Depesza ‘Stem’ nr 91 do Delegata, 15 X 1942, received 20 X 1942.

<sup>19</sup> R. Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 98.

formation west too. But ensuring this information broke into the mainstream media was problematic. Polish and Jewish pressure for an allied response eventually brought results in late November and December of 1942. The information sent from Warsaw with Karski and other couriers played an important role in challenging the Allied censorship regime, as shall be seen below, but news of the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz was not brought into the public view.

## KARSKI'S KNOWLEDGE OF AUSCHWITZ

During the summer of 1942 Karski spent some time in Warsaw. He was employed in the underground's Biuro Informacji i Propagandy (Information and Propaganda Office) and was well-placed to become informed of the true function of Auschwitz. News of the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz had reached underground leaders by late July or early August at the very latest and news about the gassing of Jews was sent to London via Budapest with the regular couriered post on September 4, 1942<sup>20</sup>. A report on mortality at Auschwitz stated that,

*the gas chamber is employed for those who are ill or incapable of work and those who have been brought in transports especially for the purpose (Soviet prisoners of war and, recently, Jews)<sup>21</sup>.*

It also reported that 250 people a day were dying at the camp, excluding those at Brzezinka (Birkenau), indicating an even higher daily death rate.

On September 1 Karski was with Stefan Korboński, the head of the Directorate of Civilian Resistance, in the basement of the Warsaw Polytechnic and could have been directly informed about the mass murder of Jews at Auschwitz<sup>22</sup>. On September 8, a Home Army circular reported that 1000 Jews a day were being murdered by gassing at Auschwitz<sup>23</sup>. News of Auschwitz was not a secret amongst the Polish underground. The longer Karski remained in Warsaw during September 1942, the more information about the camp is likely to have reached him.

Defining what Karski carried is problematic. Wood and Jankowski<sup>24</sup> refer to a „ledger” at the Polish underground Movement Study Trust entitled „Materiały otrzymane od delegata z kraju” which, they claim, lists material carried by Karski. „Materiały otrzymane od delegata z kraju” is not a „ledger” – it is a regular Ministry of the Interior file. Though this file does not name Karski, some documents in „Materiały otrzymane od delegata z kraju” are likely to have been carried (at least

<sup>20</sup> AAN Warszawa, 1325 202/I-31, (213) (Microfilm 2201/9I). Also see „Zeszyty Oświęcimskie”, 1968, I, p. 33–34.

<sup>21</sup> AAN Warszawa, 1325 202/I-31, (213); Polish Underground Movement Study Trust (further: PUMST), A3.16 (158).

<sup>22</sup> E. T. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski...*, p. 130. During September the Soviets launched a bombing raid on Warsaw.

<sup>23</sup> „Informacja Bieżąca”, nr 33 (58) reprinted in „Zeszyty Oświęcimskie”, 1968, I, p. 44. The original document is at AAN Warszawa, 1325 202/III-7 t-1 (microfilm 2266/2) (146).

<sup>24</sup> E. T. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski...*, p. 283.

at some point) by Karski<sup>25</sup>. This includes news of the Warsaw Ghetto and Bełżec (in reality, Izbica) which Karski, risking his life, had visited<sup>26</sup>.

This Ministry of the Interior file also includes a report entitled „Terror niemiecki w Polsce: Oświęcim”, which, unfortunately, is missing from the records of the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust. In the United States, the Hoover Institute in Stanford has a file in the collection of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled: „Nr 6/42, War Terror, delivered by Jan Karski”<sup>27</sup>. This file is „Sprawozdanie 6/42”, which was put together in London and reproduced reports from Warsaw including many documents listed in „Materiały otrzymane od delegata z kraju”. „Sprawozdanie 6/42” included the report, first sent on September 4, which contained a very brief mention of the gassing of Jews at Auschwitz and was distributed to the Polish Cabinet on December 23, 1942 (that is, after the Polish Government’s December 10 note to the allies and the UN Declaration of December 17).

Karski did not arrive in Britain until November 25. He reached London on November 26 and was held for 2 days at British intelligence’s interrogation centre at the Royal Patriotic Schools in south London. However, the information that he carried and passed on to Polish intelligence in Paris was received in London earlier. Michał Protasewicz of the Polish VI Bureau advised Stefan Rowecki in Warsaw on November 17 that Karski’s post had arrived<sup>28</sup>. But it is important to note that Karski was not the only courier who carried information about the Holocaust west during the autumn of 1942. In addition, recognising that news of the Warsaw Ghetto, Bełżec, Treblinka and Sobibór was published regardless of the identity of the courier/emissary who brought the material to London helps focus attention on Karski’s activities in London and their significance.

Indeed, Karski had no influence on the dissemination of reports which he carried when they reached London. Karski arrived in London on November 26 and was not released from British custody until November 28, by which time the reports received in London detailing the Holocaust (Warsaw Ghetto, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka) had been distributed to British officials and politicians, Jewish representatives and the press<sup>29</sup>.

In the United States, on November 24, Rabbi Stephen Wise held a press conference revealing data from the Riegner telegram. That same day, drawing on data

<sup>25</sup> PUMST, MSW 16. Also see Karski’s note to the Polish Government dated 30 XI 1942 - Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, PRM 105. Karski listed the organisations/groups in Poland who provided him with data to be distributed in Britain.

<sup>26</sup> On June 2, 1982, Yad Vashem recognised Karski as „Righteous among the Nations” for entering the ghetto and a camp, and subsequently disseminating this information in the West. See Internet site: [Yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/karski.asp](http://Yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/karski.asp), last accessed 10 IX 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Hoover Institute Archive (further: HIA), MSZ Box 74, Folder 27. After the war, Karski gathered documents for the Hoover Institute. It is possible that he credited himself with delivering report Nr 6/42. However, information included in „Sprawozdanie 6/42” was sent multiple times.

<sup>28</sup> See PUMST A.3.8.1.1 (50).

<sup>29</sup> The date of Karski’s release from British custody is given in NA.FO 371 /32231.

that had been sent from Warsaw the Polish Government released news that only 40 000 ration cards had been printed for Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto for October<sup>30</sup>. The next day „The New York Times” on page 10 reported the information from the Polish Government, stating that in March 1942, the Jewish population of Warsaw had been 433 000 and that the Germans had deported Jews to *special camps at Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor*.

„The New York Times” also published news from Jerusalem on the same page as the data from the Polish Government on November 25, 1942. The American paper of record revealed that trainloads of Jewish adults and children were being *taken to great crematoriums at Oswiecim [sic!]* (i.e. Auschwitz). The source of this story was a woman from Sosnowiec who arrived in Palestine earlier that month<sup>31</sup>. The data was later repackaged and was included in a memorandum handed by Jewish representatives to President Roosevelt on December 8, 1942. A copy of this memorandum reached the Foreign Office in early January of 1943<sup>32</sup>. This data is the first and indeed the only reference to the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz that can be documented as reaching Western audiences in November and December 1942.

On November 25, 1942, the Polish Government forwarded a summary of a report on the destruction of Polish Jewry, derived from the reports sent from Warsaw, to Alexander Easterman of the British Section of the World Jewish Congress. Easterman and Sydney Silverman met with British Foreign Secretary Antony Eden’s deputy, Richard Law, on November 26. Silverman told Law that a Four-Power Declaration (Great Britain, USSR, United States and China) was necessary. Law was later to advise his colleagues in the Foreign Office that some kind of gesture was required to avoid Silverman and his friends causing *a lot of trouble*<sup>33</sup>.

The Polish Government distributed news to the press. „The Daily Telegraph” carried articles about the Holocaust on November 24 and 25 and mentioned the camps at Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka; „Dziennik Polski”, on November 26, carried a front page story about the Warsaw Ghetto; and the Jewish Chronicle, on November 27, carried the headline *Destruction of Polish Jewry: Mass murder by Nazis, 250 000 dead in 6 months*. Confirmation of the Riegner Telegram by the State Department changed the discursive landscape in which news of the Holocaust was presented.

The Polish Government had made moves to share material received from Warsaw on November 12 with the Western Allies immediately. Reports were translated into English and dispatched to the Polish Embassy in the United States. Obviously, there was no need to translate material unless the aim was to share the information

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<sup>30</sup> The Polish Government’s note can be found at NA.FO 371/30923 (76 and 77). Also see PISM PRM 76/1 (13).

<sup>31</sup> See W. Laqueur, *The terrible secret. Suppression of the truth about Hitler’s „Final Solution”*, New York, 1980, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> NA.FO 371/34361 (CM 255). Also see M. Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and Censorship...*, chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> NA.FO 371/30923 C11923.

with English speakers. This English language collection of reports bore the date of November 27, though it is not clear whether this refers to the date it was dispatched from London, reached Washington DC, or the date it was translated<sup>34</sup>. This collection of reports, which includes the report on mortality at Auschwitz that was first sent west on September 4, 1942, is the best hard evidence that has been located to support Bartoszewski's contention that Karski's mission resulted in the Western Allies being informed of what was happening at Auschwitz-Birkenau. However, as evidence, it is predicated on the assumption that Karski also carried the same report that was first sent west on September 4, 1942.

The November 27, 1942, English language document has not been located in British or American records and it does not reveal that 1000 Jews per day were being gassed at Auschwitz – information that was circulated in Warsaw in early September 1942. In short, even if the British and Americans received the full (September 4, 1942) report on mortality at Auschwitz in November or December 1942, the full extent of what was happening at the camp would not have been revealed.

In summary, some news of the Holocaust that reached London from Warsaw in November 1942, was distributed prior to Karski's arrival in the United Kingdom and before his release from British custody. During Karski's time at the Royal Patriotic Schools, Jewish representatives had lobbied Richard Law for an Allied Declaration. By the time Karski was released on November 28, 1942, news of the Nazi mass killing of Jews was being published – drawing on reports which Karski and unknown others had carried. Karski did not reveal the Holocaust to officials and journalists in London – they had already been advised, but his eyewitness' testimony still had the power to shock his interlocutors.

### KARSKI'S TESTIMONY

Karski left Gibraltar by plane on November 25. In the early hours of November 26, 1942, he was transferred to the MI19 interrogation centre in south London and was interviewed by British intelligence. The report from that interview was released several years ago and is available at the National Archives in Kew. It is not a transcript of the interview but a summary of divulged information that was circulated to intelligence and Foreign Office officials. The report mentions the situation in the Warsaw Ghetto, but does not refer to Belzec – which Karski thought he had visited. It is not known whether Karski spoke of Belzec during his interview with MI19. The fact that it was not recorded in the MI19 report of the interview may merely reflect that the British were not interested in that particular information. Similarly, there is no record of Karski mentioning the situation at Auschwitz either.

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<sup>34</sup> HIA, Polish Embassy in the United States (Reports 1920–1947), box 29, file 2, Report on conditions in Poland, 27 XI 1942. The document is also available online at Poland's National Digital Archive: [Szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/36/0/-/29/str/1/18#tab2, jpeg190](http://Szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/36/0/-/29/str/1/18#tab2, jpeg190), last accessed 5 VII 2012.

Karski was given the low C rating by the British, meaning that his information was not deemed particularly noteworthy. The Polish Government rated Karski considerably more highly and he was introduced to officials from the Political Warfare Executive (which dealt with Britain's propaganda to Europe) in December 1942, and was later, in February 1943, able to meet Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden<sup>35</sup>. Karski was also encouraged by Lord Selborne (Minister of Economic Warfare) in 1943 to *inform as many people as possible* about what he saw in occupied Poland<sup>36</sup>. Selborne, unlike officials in the Foreign Office and Political Warfare Executive, considered atrocity stories good propaganda.

In the first half of 1943, Karski met with members of the press corps and publishers, amongst others, and was able to relay his story. However, Karski's story was not focused on what was happening to the Jews, but on the broader situation in Poland. And nowhere, whether in the report to the Polish Government, in the reports of meetings with MI19 officials or with Anthony Eden was the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz mentioned. Even when Auschwitz was spoken about in Karski's meeting with President Roosevelt in July 1943, there was no mention of the Nazi systematic killing of Jews at that camp, though the Nazi programme of annihilation of Jews was referred to.

No conclusive documentary evidence has been located to support Bartoszewski's 2005 claim that the British and American Governments received news of „what was going on in Auschwitz-Birkenau” as a result of Karski's mission. The only information that the Western Allies may have received from the Poles was the document detailing the mortality at Auschwitz, which briefly mentioned that Jews were now being gassed at the camp, and which was translated into English and sent by the Polish Government to the Polish Embassy in the United States.

However, assessing Karski's role in informing the Western Allies is complicated by the fact that the documentary record is incomplete. We have a summary of Karski's MI19 interview, not a transcript; we do not have minutes of Karski's meetings with Political Warfare Executive officials in December 1942, with journalists or with British intelligence figures in early 1943, or with United States intelligence officials in the summer of 1943. It remains possible that Karski did verbally inform Western Governments of what was happening at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but until some evidence is located it cannot be proved.

Putting aside the issue of the incompleteness of the documentary record, several theories can be advanced to explain why there is no documentary evidence of Karski talking or writing about the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz in late 1942

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<sup>35</sup> On December 9, 1942, Karski was taken by Stanisław Mikołajczyk to meet the representatives of the Political Warfare Executive at the home of Harold Osborne. See Osborne to Mikołajczyk 7 XII 1942 and 21 XII 1942; HIA Stanisław Mikołajczyk Papers, Box 38, Folder 4 (Radio Świt). Also at Poland's National Digital Archive, Szukajwarchiwach.pl/800/22/0/-/38 (jpeg 70 and 103 respectively). It is not known what was discussed at this meeting.

<sup>36</sup> E. T. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski...*, p. 172.

or in 1943. First, Karski was not informed of what was happening at the camp whilst in Warsaw in August and September 1942. This seems very unlikely since the information was sent to London on September 4, further information was circulated in the regular Home Army report (September 8). Second, Karski, aware of the news, simply failed to confirm the information in the report about Auschwitz that reached London on November 12. Third, Karski was cautious and only spoke about details of the Holocaust to which he was an eye-witness, perhaps in an effort to maintain his credibility. Fourth, Karski did advise the Polish leadership in London, but it was the leadership which chose to marginalise the news. Fifth, Karski informed both Polish and British officials, but the British put pressure on the Poles not to reveal this new information.

The documentary record, therefore allows for different interpretations of Karski's apparent failure to speak or write about the mass killing of Jews at Auschwitz. He may have not known the facts, he may have not spoken of the camp in order to maintain credibility with sceptical audiences, he may have simply followed Polish Government advice, or conformed with the Polish policy to adhere to British information management strategy. It is clear, however, that the documentary record does not support the contention that Karski informed the Western powers about what was happening at Auschwitz. The weaker contention that the Western Allies were informed about what was happening at Auschwitz, in part, as a result of Karski's mission can be maintained if it is assumed that the Allies received the document detailing mortality at Auschwitz which was sent from Warsaw and that this document was also included in the microfilm Karski apparently carried to Paris.

## CONCLUSION

Jan Karski's 1942 mission from Warsaw to London was to deliver news from Poland to the Polish Government in Exile. „News” included details of current events, political developments in Polish milieu and a broad overview of social sentiment and the war effort. David Engel (1993) rightly notes that *when Karski arrived in London, he presented a lengthy written report to Sikorski that made no mention of the Jewish situation at all*<sup>37</sup>. The view that the main objective of Karski's 1942 mission was to reveal details about the Nazi genocide of Europe's Jews is wide off the mark<sup>38</sup>.

However, Karski did visit the Warsaw ghetto and Izbica in the summer of 1942 and was entrusted by Jewish representatives in Warsaw to pass messages on to their counterparts in London. Karski spoke with the two Jewish members of the Polish

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<sup>37</sup> D. Engel, *Facing a Holocaust. The Polish Government in Exile and the Jews, 1943–1945*, Chapel Hill, 1993. For Karski's report to Sikorski, see HIA-Karski, Box 1.

<sup>38</sup> Also see Karski's testimony about his 1943 meeting with Franklin Roosevelt which he gave to Claude Lanzmann for the documentary Shoah. Available at: [Youtube.com/watch?v=paP02Us8CyM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paP02Us8CyM).

National Council, Shmuel Zygielbojm and Ignacy Schwarzbart, in London in December 1942. Karski's testimony profoundly disturbed the Polish Jewish representatives. Karski's eyewitness testimony confirmed the full horror, revealed in the various reports that reached London, of what was happening in Poland.

The significance of Karski's arrival in London in relation to news of the Holocaust was not so much that he delivered new information. As noted here, the information about the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto and the mass killing of Jews arrived before Karski did and was being publicised whilst Karski was in Gibraltar and, later, in British custody in London. Rather, Karski's presence in London may have added some momentum to the effort of the Polish Government and Jewish representatives to persuade the Allied powers to issue a declaration condemning Nazi atrocities against Jews<sup>39</sup>. Karski was able to provide details, answer questions in an authoritative way and advise his interlocutors of what he had witnessed.

Karski was released from British custody on November 28, after the State Department had authorised the dissemination of information from the Riegner Telegram, and he therefore entered a discursive environment in which it was possible to talk about the Nazi genocidal programme against Jews. Couriers who arrived later found that their news about the Holocaust was not particularly welcome and hence not published in the mainstream British press.

In relation to Auschwitz, Jan Karski remains enigmatic. Although there is no evidence that Karski spoke or wrote about the mass killing of Jews at the camp, it remains a possibility that he did so. British information management may have insisted that this new information be marginalised. Bartoszewski's 2005 evocation of Jan Karski in relation to Auschwitz is therefore problematic. It signals the difficulty of talking about the Holocaust in an era in which Auschwitz has become the symbol of that genocide. But the Holocaust was not just Auschwitz; Nazi colonial racism resulted in hundreds of thousands of Jewish deaths in ghettos through starvation and disease. Death through labour was also part of the Nazi genocide. Jews

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<sup>39</sup> The Polish National Council had called on the Allies to condemn the German extermination policy on November 27, 1942. Frank Savery advised his Foreign Office colleague, Frank Roberts, on December 3, 1942, that he was not convinced by the news about Bełżec. See NA.FO 371/31097 (191) Savery to Roberts December 3, 1942. Karski's meeting with Anthony Eden on February 4, 1943, resulted in Eden advising the War Cabinet that „the entire population of Warsaw, including the remnants of the Jews, is united in their hatred for, and resistance to, the Germans”; NA FO 371/34550 Memo: Eden to War Cabinet February 17, 1943. Jan Nowak argued in 2001 that „United Kingdom and United States officialdom for a long time preferred to pretend that they were not aware of the scale of the Holocaust. That is why in all the internal reports based on the testimony of Jan Karski, and a year later based on my account, the information provided by us on the genocide of the Jews was removed”. See J. Ciechanowski, *Reports on the Holocaust*, in: *Intelligence Co-operation between Poland and Great Britain during World War II*: v. 1: *The Report of the Anglo-Polish Historical Committee*, ed. T. Stirling, D. Nałęcz, T. Dubicki, London, 2005, p. 535–546.

were killed on a mass scale through open air shootings, through deportations, and through death camps. It was only in 1943, and in the spring of 1944 with the deportations of Hungarian Jews, that Auschwitz became the centre of the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry.

The evocation of Karski also signals the ongoing tension in coming to understand different Polish and Jewish memories of the period of the Second World War. Bartoszewski distinguished himself through his work with Żegota, which sought to provide aid and shelter to Jews. Other Poles did not, and some, as work by Barbara Engelking amongst others has demonstrated, engaged in their own private wars against Jews<sup>40</sup>.

If Bartoszewski's speech is understood as an attempt to bridge different Polish and Jewish memories, the mention of Karski can be seen to make a broader point about (some) Polish actions during the Holocaust. Seen in this light, Bartoszewski is on firmer ground. In communicating news of the Holocaust to the Western Allies, Karski was part of a significant underground structure which continuously gathered and sent data west via radio and via couriers. The success of disseminating some of the news about the Holocaust in November and December of 1942 was not repeated later in the war, not because information was withheld by the Polish Government, as has been thought by numerous scholars, but because the Western Allies censored the news about atrocities in general and the mass killing of Jews in particular.

In the broad context of the Western Allies' choreography of news of the Holocaust, Karski's arrival in London was well-timed. The endorsement of the veracity of the Riegner telegram by the United States's State Department changed the discursive environment in which news of the Holocaust was received, and opened a brief period for Jewish and Polish representatives to speak fairly freely about what was happening to Jews in occupied Europe. Karski's eyewitness testimony may have added urgency to the campaign for an Allied Declaration to condemn the Nazi genocide, though pressure for a Declaration was building prior to Karski's release from British custody. This objective was achieved with the UN Declaration of December 17, 1942, but other demands, such as retaliation, were not. By early 1943, news of the Holocaust was once more being marginalised or not reported in the Allied press.

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<sup>40</sup> B. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945*, Warszawa, 2011.

MICHAEL FLEMING

## JAN KARSKI, AUSCHWITZ I WIADOMOŚCI O HOLOKAUŚCIE

STRESZCZENIE

Autor artykułu przebadiał materiały archiwalne, by ustalić, jakie dowody istnieją na poparcie twierdzenia, że rządy Wielkiej Brytanii i Stanów Zjednoczonych zostały poinformowane o tym, co działo się w Auschwitz-Birkenau, w wyniku misji Jana Karskiego z 1942 roku. Twierdzenie to, zawarte w wystąpieniu polskiego ministra spraw zagranicznych Władysława Bartoszewskiego w 2005 roku, podczas obchodów 60. rocznicy wyzwolenia Auschwitz, sugeruje, że Jan Karski poinformował zachodnich aliantów o wywożeniu i zagazowywaniu Żydów z Europy w Auschwitz wiosną i latem 1942 roku. Autor artykułu stwierdza, że nie znaleziono żadnych twardych, dokumentalnych dowodów na to, aby Karski mówił o masowym mordowaniu Żydów w 1942 czy 1943 roku. Możliwe jednak, że poinformował ważnych urzędników służb wywiadowczych oraz propagandowych o systematycznym mordowaniu Żydów w Auschwitz, nie zostawiając śladów w dokumentacji. Dostępne materiały źródłowe pokazują kilka różniących się od siebie i sprzecznych interpretacji działań Karskiego w sprawie Auschwitz. Zdaniem autora, w sprawie rozpowszechniania wiadomości o Auschwitz Karski pozostaje postacią enigmatyczną. Kwestia tego, czy Karski poinformował zachodnich aliantów o tym, co działo się w Auschwitz-Birkenau, jest nie tylko interesująca z historycznego punktu widzenia; dotyczy również tego, jak Holocaust jest pamiętany oraz jakiego rodzaju miejsca i wydarzenia są w tym upamiętnianiu uprzywilejowane.

**Słowa klucze:** Jan Karski, Władysław Bartoszewski, Auschwitz, Holocaust