

The genesis of *Story of a Secret State*

[Wood and Jankowski, *Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust* (Wiley, 1994), pp. 224-229:]

Jan's first month in the U.S. [during his second visit, early in 1944] was a whirlwind of activity. By March 17, he reported back to London that he had "established communication with the most important firms in Hollywood." He found the film to be a tough sell. Movie moguls were wary of Poland as a subject, fearing they would be drawn into the Polish-Soviet controversy. They also worried that any such movie might be overtaken by events, given the fast pace of both military and political activity in early 1944. And, with the defeat of Germany seen as inevitable, producers sensed that the public would soon have little taste for flag-waving war movies.

Karski still expressed hope for the cinematic project in the March report, but in the meantime he busied himself with his other propaganda efforts. He had already given lectures in Washington and New York, had been interviewed on a national radio program, had persuaded the *Washington Post* to write a story on the Polish underground based on his information, and had met with editors from *Collier's*, *Time* and *Life* magazines (laying the groundwork for the *Life* cover story he would write a few months later). Through contacts provided by the Polish embassy, Jan had also begun contacting public-relations firms and literary agents about a possible fallback project, in case the film did not work out — a book about the Polish underground.

Before the end of March, Karski had found the man who would make that book a reality. Emery Reeves called himself both a literary agent and a publisher. In an era when agents wielded far less power and influence than they do today, he did indeed serve as the American literary representative for such prominent figures as Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden. But he was not listed in directories of literary agents, nor did his Cooperation Publishing Co. actually publish any books. In essence, Reeves was an entrepreneur, trading in fame. Karski's job was to thrust himself into the limelight; Reeves could help him accomplish that goal.

In their first meeting, Reeves explained that once he secured a publisher for Karski, a book could serve as the key to everything else the government wanted him to do. If executed properly, it would open doors among magazine publishers so he could write articles about the Polish cause. If it turned out to be successful, there would be at least some chance of arranging a movie deal based on it, whereas Jan's current efforts to interest Hollywood were hopeless, according to Reeves. And in the course of publicizing the book, the author would gain much more media exposure and have many more opportunities to speak about Poland's war effort than would otherwise be available. For his part, Reeves made clear why he considered the deal worthwhile. "He thinks the book will be a sensation," Jan cabled to Professor Kot in London.

At the same time, however, Reeves laid down the law to Karski. If they were to work together, the Pole would have to follow his rules. For starters, they would have a 50-50 financial arrangement. Reeves would siphon off half of everything Karski made from the book. (The standard take for literary agents at the time was 10 percent.) Moreover, Jan would be under a strict writing regimen. The book would be worthless if he did not finish it quickly. Every week, he was to bring a certain number of manuscript pages to Reeves' office. And the content of the book had to meet Reeves' specifications. He wanted the story of Karski's adventures, not some dry treatise on the organization

of the underground movement, and certainly not anything that would add fuel to the Polish-Soviet dispute. No American publisher would ever lend its name to a volume of obvious propaganda from a foreign government. Karski needed to understand that at the outset, Reeves told him.

Jan agreed enthusiastically to the terms Reeves set out. He was not as completely hoodwinked about the money involved as Reeves may have imagined. "I accepted financial conditions very onerous to myself," he told the government-in-exile, adding that he did so intentionally. "I want very urgently to interest my agent financially," Karski explained in a letter to London, "so that he will assure the maximum exposure for the book. I operate under the assumption that the propaganda effect is more important than a few hundred of the 'author's' dollars."

From London, Kot gave his assent to the deal, though he still cherished the notion of at least a short-subject documentary on the underground movement and instructed Karski not to give up on the film idea just yet. But by the beginning of April 1944, Jan had forsaken almost all other activities to concentrate on the task at hand. He had the cooperation of the Polish embassy and its New York propaganda office, which retained a bilingual typist for him and set up an office for him in a Manhattan hotel room. There he reported early every morning to dictate his memoirs.

"It was tremendous work," he wrote in a report to the government shortly after finishing the first draft. "I worked literally day and night, from one interval to the next and on to bedtime.... I have never in my life been so overworked and tired as I am currently. The last three months of work on the book now seem like a nightmare to me."

How weary the stenographer became may be left to the imagination. In the space of a few weeks, she typed roughly 1,000 pages of text — sometimes taking dictation in English, sometimes in Polish, and sometimes simultaneously translating from Polish to English as Jan spoke. Since her English was better than Karski's, she reworded his thoughts when he spoke in that language.

The project moved along smoothly for the first few months. Karski turned in his text to Reeves on schedule, and even pleasantly surprised his agent with the quality of his work. The initial plan had been for Reeves and a freelance editor, William Poster, to fashion the book themselves based on detailed information from Karski. But after seeing the first installments of Jan's work, Reeves and Poster changed plans somewhat. "Upon getting acquainted with my manuscript," Karski proudly reported to his superiors in England, "they considered that it possessed a certain freshness, that it had a good, 'bookish' construction, that it was written with sufficient literary talent, and that after supplemental translation... and a little 'adaptation,' it would be suitable for publication."

Before long, however, Jan began to realize that the "adaptations" the Americans had in mind did not necessarily serve his and the Polish government's interests. First came a conflict over a chapter on the nefarious activities of the Soviet-sponsored communist agents in Poland. Karski's position on his country's relations with the U.S.S.R. was moderate by Polish standards, but he did want to convey to American readers a sense of the difficulties his underground movement faced as a result of communist misdeeds. Reeves flatly rejected the chapter. Not only would it be controversial, he said, but it was also a departure from the agreed first person format of the book, since Karski had not personally encountered the communist provocateurs.

Jan considered the issue so important that he sent a telegram to Mikolajczyk, seeking his advice on how to respond. The prime minister and others in the government agreed that "if a book such as this is possible for the price of omitting the Eastern question, it is better to do that than not to do it at

all." Ultimately, Karski added a very conciliatory postscript to the book, conceding that there were other anti-Nazi elements in Poland carrying on their activities under the direction or influence of Moscow. Other conflicts arose over similar instances in which Reeves' interests diverged from Karski's. Jan complained that his agent tended to "exaggerate my role and significance and to stress the sensational parts of the story, not the ideological-political." At the same time, though, Reeves apparently was skeptical of some of Karski's sensational claims. "I had the greatest difficulty in convincing my agent that the book set forth authentic information," he later reported. After Jan obtained a letter from Mikolajczyk affirming that the government stood behind his word, Reeves expressed less concern.

Despite these assurances, much of what Karski wrote was far from accurate — even before Reeves and Poster began "adapting" the text. Security concerns, naturally, forced him to alter scores of details. He changed the names of nearly all underground members he mentioned, falsified his own background and family history, and fabricated logistical aspects of his missions. "I had to be careful so that after the war they would not hang me for breaching security," Karski later said, only partly tongue-in-cheek. But he also distorted facts in order to provide more dramatic illustrations of the underground experience. His friend Tadeusz Pilc, for example, became "Tadeusz Kilec," dying not in Buchenwald but on a public gallows in the main square of Lublin, after a heroic attempt to derail a train.

"I never altered the essential reality," Karski wrote, in a report that discussed the manuscript's "adaptations." His assertion is debatable. Jan clearly made every effort to put across a positive image for the resistance movement; such was the entire purpose of his book. He mentioned its endemic political infighting, but conveyed none of his own disgust with the surreal partisan fancies of certain underground publications. He did not discuss the violent opposition of right-wing factions in Poland to any hint of detente with the Soviet Union. His text contained no references to the Polish anti-Semitism Jan witnessed, nor did it mention most of the people he had met after reaching England.

After Reeves succeeded, early that summer, in persuading Boston-based Houghton Mifflin and Co. to publish the book, still more "adaptations" ensued. At the end of June, Karski reported to the government about one such enhancement:

My publishers especially emphasized building up the Jewish part of the book. They want me to write about the struggle in the Warsaw Ghetto [the uprising that took place five months after Jan reached England], despite my opinion that it would not be related to the overall construction of the book. They think that it will be more beneficial for Poland and will also deepen the interest of American public opinion in the book. Maybe I will use their suggestion — not only for the above reasons, but also because the longer I am away from the horrors of the Homeland and further from the front, the more I feel the terrible tragedy of Polish Jewry.

In the final text of the book, the Bund and Zionist leaders in Warsaw tell Karski of plans for the Ghetto uprising. Karski may well have added this detail, which does not conform to what later became known of the origins of the revolt, in response to Houghton Mifflin's pressure.

The publisher also wanted more of another type of content. Late in the summer, Karski was invited to Boston for dinner with a Mr. Houghton (apparently retired president Edward O. Houghton) of Houghton Mifflin Co. Houghton told Jan he was delighted with the manuscript. But then, leaning

conspiratorially toward his guest, he expressed one reservation. "Mr. Karski, we expect that your book will be widely read," said Houghton. "The American public expects to find certain things in a book like this. Our readers will surely notice what my staff and I have noticed about your manuscript. Mr. Karski, you describe here four years of your life. Yet you say little about your personal life. Did you never fall in love during that time? There must have been something!"

Karski shook his head, smiling.

Houghton chuckled slightly. "Surely — and I speak only for my readers," he continued — "surely you don't want to create the impression that you have something to hide, that perhaps you do not prefer women."

"Mr. Houghton, I give you my word of honor," parried Karski. "There is no such secret. I simply didn't have time for any affairs! You read the manuscript. I was in transit all the time, or in Russia, or in the Gestapo jail, in Krakow, in Warsaw, in London, in Washington. There was nothing!"

Houghton cast his eyes down at the table. "Pity," he said softly.

Jan's protestations of innocence were in vain. Subtle hints of a romance between him and Danuta Slawik (identified as "Danuta Sawa" in the text) were suitably included in the book.

Karski's primary motivation in the book project was bolstering Poland's image in the United States. His agent and publisher were driven by a desire to sell books. Neither side had any particular commitment to historical accuracy; neither intended the book to be a comprehensive document of Karski's wartime experiences. Neither, apparently, foresaw that scholars decades later would rely on *Story of a Secret State*, as Houghton Mifflin decided to title the book, for important source material on the history of the Final Solution and other wartime topics, unaware of its gaps or "Adaptations."

[notes, pp. 302ff:]

Chapter 11: Fame in Vain

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Jan Karski telegram to Prof. Kot, March 23, 1944. Box 160, HIA/MSZ.

Jan Karski letter to "Mr. Minister" (unnamed, probably Kot), on progress of book and abandonment of film idea, June 30, 1944. Box 160, HIA/MSZ.

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224 "established communication": Karski letter, March 17, 1944.

224 other propaganda efforts: Karski letter, March 17, 1944; Paul Winkler, "Polish Underground: Its Many-Sided Operations," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1944.

224 Emery Reeves: K. Ints. February 28, 1992, October 3, 1993.

225 "He thinks the book will be a sensation": Karski telegram to Kot, March 23, 1944.

225 "I accepted financial conditions": Karski letter, June 30, 1944.

226 Kot gave his assent: Kot telegram to Polish Information Center/New York, April 6, 1944.

226 "It was tremendous work": Karski letter, June 30, 1944.

226 "Upon getting acquainted with my manuscript": Karski letter, June 30, 1944.

226 conflict over chapter on communists: Karski, "Report on the Book," January 15, 1945.

227 "if a book such as this is possible": Karski, "Report on the Book," January 15, 1945.

227 "exaggerate my role"... "the greatest difficulty": Karski, "Report on the Book," January 15, 1945.

227 "I had to be careful": K. Int. June 15, 1992.

227 "I never altered the essential reality": Karski, "Report on the Book," January 15, 1945. Cf. Karski letter, June 30, 1944: "Names, places and a whole series of situations in the underground movement are faked."

228 "My publishers especially emphasized": Karski letter, June 30, 1944.

228 meeting with Mr. Houghton: K. Ints. February 28, 1992, October 3, 1993. Edward O. Houghton retired from his family's publishing house in 1939 but remained involved in its operations. The only other Houghton then active at the firm was Henry O. Houghton, clerk of the corporation. Laughlin, *An Informal Sketch*, pp. 8, 13.

[notes, pp. 305-306:]

236 foreign editions: *Mon témoignage devant le monde* (Paris: Editions Self, 1948); *Den hemmelige stat* (Oslo: Aas & Wahls, 1946); *Den hemliga staten* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1945). In addition, reviews of the book appeared in Australia and South Africa, though it is unclear whether separate editions were published in those countries. Karski also signed contracts for Italian, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew and Arabic translations to be published in Europe, South America and the Middle East. For unknown reasons, however, none of these editions was actually published. **Karski received at the time (and has received again in recent years) offers from Polish-language presses to publish translations of the book. Both during the war and later in life, he strenuously opposed the issuance of a Polish edition. The book's falsifications, dramatizations and intentional oversimplifications — however necessary they may have been to put across the Polish message to an American audience — would be immediately apparent to a Polish reader, Karski argued, and would thus harm his reputation.** [emphasis added]