

## CITY

## HOLOCAUST EDUCATION MONTH



DAVID KAWAI/OTTAWA CITIZEN

Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter speaks with Wanda Urbanska, Jan Karski Education Foundation president, at the unveiling of an exhibit at the Canadian War Museum on Jan Karski, who risked his life to bring news of Nazi atrocities to the Polish government in exile and to Allied commanders.

## Resister spread word of Nazi horrors

A new exhibit at the Canadian War Museum tells the story of a courageous Pole who exposed Nazi atrocities to Allied commanders, **TOM SPEARS** writes.

In 1942, Poland had the largest anti-Nazi resistance movement in occupied Europe, known as the Secret State. It wanted to tell the Allied countries about Nazi massacres in the occupied countries.

The messenger they chose was a young Polish Catholic named Jan Karski, who spoke fluent English, German and French and had a photographic memory.

His solo trek to the West is now the subject of a new exhibit at the Canadian War Museum, in partnership with the Polish embassy.

Karski escaped death even before his mission. As a young and idealistic Polish army officer, he was captured by Soviet troops in 1939. He

posed as a private and asked to return home to see a fictitious pregnant wife.

The Red Army let him leave. His fellow officers were later murdered in the Katyn Forest.

Karski went on three missions for the underground, including one to France where the Gestapo captured him.

Tortured, then further injured when he gave up all hope and tried to kill himself, he escaped by crawling across the hospital roof.

But his biggest mission was in 1942 when the young Catholic carried out news of the massacres in the Warsaw Ghetto and the death camps. Karski had seen the hor-

rors of the ghetto first-hand, and had dressed as a guard to sneak into a "transit camp" where Jews were sent on to the death camps.

Pretending to be a French worker conscripted to work in occupied Poland, he used forged documents allowing him to go "home" to France. (His accented French would have betrayed him, so a dentist shot his mouth full of drugs to make it swell and explain his odd speech.)

He was smuggled from France to Germany and on to America.

His early hopes were high. He met President Franklin Roosevelt and other leaders, but many couldn't bring themselves to believe that even the Nazis would try to exterminate an entire people. Hollywood turned down the chance to tell his story.

So Karski wrote. Houghton Mifflin published his book, *Story of a Se-*

cret State, in 1944, carrying his message directly to the people. Major U.S. newspapers gave it big play and it sold 400,000 copies.

After the war, he became a U.S. citizen and a professor at Georgetown University. He is commemorated at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel.

Karski "is a figure who beckons people to do the right thing," Wanda Urbanska of the Jan Karski Educational Foundation said Thursday at the exhibit's launch.

The exhibit is a series of 22 panels of photos and text describing Karski's life, especially the mission to the West.

It was produced by the Polish History Museum and the Jan Karski Educational Foundation.

tspears@ottawacitizen.com  
twitter.com/TomSpears1