

A Tribute to Jan Karski

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TRANSCRIPT

Dean Carol Lancaster: Good evening. Excellency, honored guests, students, members of Georgetown University, on behalf of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, welcome to a tribute to Jan Karski. My name is Carol Lancaster, and I am the Dean of the School of Foreign Service here at Georgetown.

On this occasion of Georgetown University Press's publication of the *Story of a Secret State*, the front piece is up there, we gather to hear from a panel of distinguished guests and members of Georgetown's community to honor the life and legacy of Jan Karski. I want to convey to you the apologies from President Jack DeGioia, who could not be here today. He has gone to Rome to attend the investiture of the Pope. But standing in his place is our very distinguished Chairman of the Board of Directors of Georgetown University, Paul Tagliabue. Paul graduated from Georgetown College in 1962, and very meaningful these days, he was then captain of the Georgetown basketball team. He's had a distinguished career as a lawyer, working with Covington & Burling and was commissioner of the National Football League. Paul, please come to the podium.

Clapping

Paul Tagliabue: Thank you, Carol and welcome everyone, and most importantly thank you for joining us for this very special occasion. It's a privilege to be here today to honor Jan Karski, a great and just man and a true hero among us. I'd like first to direct your attention to the Presidential Medal of Freedom here to my right, your left, which was posthumously awarded to Dr. Karski last year. It is the highest honor awarded to civilians in the United States and though it's usually housed at the Polish Embassy, we are extremely fortunate to have it here today, for this event. I'd like to begin by expressing our deep appreciation to the Ambassador from Poland, Ryszard Schnepf. *Clapping*. Thank you, Ambassador Schnepf for all you have done to support the legacy of Dr. Karski, about which we will hear more today. We also extend a warm welcome to the members of the Polish diplomatic community who are with us today. We're very pleased that you could join us. We also thank the leadership and the board of the Jan Karski Educational Foundation for their exceptional work to promote and sustain Karski's legacy. And to Bob Billingsley, our alumnus of the School of Foreign Service, class of '68 over here to my left, a member of the Jan Karski U.S. Centennial Steering Committee. Thank you, for your extraordinary enthusiasm and support for all of his wonderful work. Also ways to express our gratitude to Richard Brown and his team at Georgetown University Press for developing this wonderful latest addition of *Story of a Secret State*. And finally, our deep thanks, and Jack DeGioia's thanks go to our distinguished panelists, Secretary Albright, Dr. Brzezinski, Rabbi White, and the Ambassador. As most of you undoubtedly know, Jan Karski was a beloved member of our community for more than 40 years. Many of you may be familiar with the statue of Jan Karski in front of the White Gravenor building. He sits cross-legged on a bench with his

chessboard and a plaque reads, quote, "A noble man walked amongst us and made us better by his presence." Dr. Karski taught at Georgetown for more than three decades. He was a model and mentor for generations of students, a man of incredible resolve, integrity, humanity, and courage. Whether he was one of your professors or not, if you were here when he was on the faculty as I was, you knew about Jan Karski, and you knew it was someone very special. His presence on our campus, his example, his leadership, his message, was all of course underscored by his incredible heroism during the Second World War. As a courier for the Polish Underground Forces, he crisscrossed enemy lines in order to bring information to the Polish Government in Exile in London. He slipped into the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as a weigh station on route to a death camp so he could provide first-hand reports of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. He escaped to London and later to the United States to report on what he saw, to deliver the pleas for help from Jewish leaders in Poland, and to call world leaders to conscience, to acknowledge the unbelievable, and to stop it. In this quest for justice in humanity, Dr. Karski put the lives of others above his own, even bearing torture at the hands of the Gestapo. His rare combination of both physical and moral courage standing as a witness and a voice for the vulnerable is an example to us all. In this example, there is a calling for us, to remember the past, to reflect on what it means in our own lives and in our own time, and to have the courage to take action where we see injustice. This is the legacy that Jan Karski left us, and it is the legacy we all share through our connection to him. It's an honor for me to be here today. I know President DeGioia is doing an extraordinary thing but he extends his best wishes to everybody and is sorry to have to be in two places at one time. Thank you all for being here and I'll turn it back to Dean Lancaster who will introduce and moderate our panel. Carol.

Clapping.

Carol Lancaster: Well, as you can see, we have an absolutely superb panel this afternoon to talk about the life of Jan Karski and his legacy. I will briefly introduce each of the panelists and then I will ask them each a question about Jan Karski and the impact he has had. We have already met Ambassador Ryszard Schnepf. He took up his post as Ambassador of Poland to the United States in September, after a long and distinguished career in the Polish Foreign Service. From 1991 to 1996 he served as Ambassador to Uruguay and Paraguay, and from 2007 to late 2008 he served as Undersecretary of State of Poland, part of the Foreign Ministry. The most important thing you need to know about Ambassador Schnepf is that he's an academic, at least that's my view. He received his Ph.D. from the Institute of History in the Polish Academy of Sciences and he confessed coming over here that he has taught at the University of Indiana, so welcome, Dr. Schnepf. I think everybody knows Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, sitting to my right. He's the counselor and trustee and a co-chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies Advisory Board, a senior research professor of international relations at the other school in Washington, a school for advanced international studies at Johns Hopkins University. He's co-chair of the American Committee for Peace and the Caucuses, and a member of the International Advisory Board of the Atlantic Council. From 1977 to 1981, Dr. Brzezinski was National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter. In 1981, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his role in the normalization of U.S.-China relations and for his contributions to the human rights and national security policies of the United States. To my left, I should take a pause, anybody not know who Madeleine Albright is? The honorable Madeleine Albright is the Michael and Virginia Mortara Distinguished Professor in the

practice of diplomacy here, at Georgetown at the School of Foreign Service. She was the 64th Secretary of State of the United States, and I might add, the first woman Secretary of the United States, but there's been a good trend after her. *Clapping*. Dr. Albright served as the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations before that. She's the author of four New York Times bestsellers, and serves as head of the National Democratic Institute, head of the chairman of the board of National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, and serves as President of the Truman Scholarship Foundation. To my far left, is Rabbi Harold White, recently retired from Georgetown University, after serving as a Jewish chaplain for 40 years. Rabbi White is the first rabbi to be appointed to a full-time campus ministry position by a Catholic University. He completed his undergraduate degree at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and received ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He currently serves as scholar at residence at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia, Mercersburg Academy in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Rabbi White has taught in the theology department of Georgetown and has been active in fostering Jewish-Christian theological dialogue in the greater metropolitan area of Washington. What I'd like to do is begin by asking Ambassador Schnepf a question. How is Jan Karski viewed in Poland today, and what is his legacy there?

Ryszard Schnepf: Thank you very much and let me begin Mr. Chairman, Dean Lancaster. Thank you very much for your kind words. I'm really delighted, Madame Secretary, Professor, Rabbi, to be in this company and to talk about Jan Karski and in such a great company of yours, I see many faces that I've met before, some of them probably I know from the newspapers, from the photos. All of you have dedicated a lot of effort to maintain the memory of Jan Karski's great work, not only his activity during the war but also here at this university, and out of this university, also in Poland. I have here, a kind of a diplomatic statement, or whatever it is, but this situation, this meeting deserves a very personal attitude, so I will leave it apart and I would like to share with you some of my personal thoughts. It was 1973 when I was a student of History Department at Warsaw University, and one day, spring, our professor Janusz Berghausen, brought a man to the class. He was a slim, well-dressed, in a diplomatic suit, man who obviously for us lived a very intensive life in the past. Of course for us, students were smoking all the time, and those were the times that we all smoked during class. He was a kind of friendly person, he smoked, he was a chain smoker. During the next two hours probably, he probably smoked some 20 or more cigarettes, and shared with us a big part of his life. He talked about how he was sent to Poland as a special emissary, how he visited the Warsaw Ghetto, and death camps, in disguise, challenging the Nazi system in Poland, in a country in bloodshed, witnessing probably the biggest crime in human history. This was Jan Karski, a silent man who shared with us his most intense moments in 1973, in a class of young people, students, having the lesson under the communism. It was a shame for us because we didn't know who Jan Karski was. We listened to him, with open mouth and not daring even asking him a question. We knew so little about this adult reality of the World War II, that we were used to know during our classes. Our professor told us, "Please, be reserved on that subject. Just don't go around talking about it. It's better for you and for us." So we did. 25 years later, in April '99, thanks to Secretary Albright, Mr. Brzezinski and many other Poles who fought for joining Poland to NATO, I met Professor Jan Karski in Polish Embassy. He was happy. He was happy because Poland just came back to the place that we, Poland, deserved. What is the legacy of Jan Karski today? Today in Poland the young generation and the older ones, they know perfectly who Jan Karski was. They know his heroic,

outstanding posture during the war, his courage and bravery, and his enormous effort to spread the message about what was happening in Poland under the occupation. He, as you know, visited probably the most important people in the world, telling them the story about the fate of Jews, and Poles, about the reality of the death camps – in vain. After the war, Jan Karski began a kind of a second life and his next mission, and this is this part that probably few people in Poland, or even in the world, they associate with Jan Karski. It is tolerance. It's something that he taught here at this university, not only the international politics but also the respect to other cultures, other religions, other traditions. And this is the message that probably Jan Karski would like us to carry on in the future. We should thank God that here in this audience we have such a special person, Kaya Mirecka-Ploss, sitting over there, a great friend of Jan Karski, Władysław Zachariasiewicz, sitting on that side, who still in their age, they go farther with a big flame of tolerance and understanding. And this should be our mission and I'm sure if Jan Karski could see us right now, he would be happy to see so many people that want to work farther to spread the most important ideas of his.

Dean Lancaster: Thank you. *Clapping*. And I read the book *Story of a Secret State* a couple of weeks ago. I picked it up thinking well I'll just dip into this and 18 hours later I put it down. And I came away wondering; well what was the explanation for this man's extraordinary insight and courage? I want to ask Madeleine that question but before I do I want to read something from her most recent book *Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War*. You wrote Madeleine, "What fascinates me and what serves as a central theme of this book is why we make the choices we do. What separates us from the world we have and the kind of ethical universe envisioned by some like Pawel? What prompts one person to act boldly in a moment of crisis and a second to seek shelter in the crowd? Why do some people, become stronger in the face of adversity while others lose heart? What separates the bully from the protector? Is it education, spiritual belief, our parents, the circumstances of our birth, traumatic events, and more likely some combination that spells the difference? More succinctly do our hopes for the future, hinge on the desirable unfolding of external events or some mysterious process within." So Madeleine, I'd like to ask you, because you knew Jan Karski, what would you say about Jan Karski in the context of this wonderful piece of writing?

Madeleine Albright: Well thank you and I'm honored to have been asked to speak about him and especially with my fellow panelists here. I do have to say something, personal first, I first heard about Jan Karski from my then boss Zbigniew Brzezinski. You forgot to say that I had been a staffer on the National Security Council and when one of the various crises over Poland happened, while President Carter and Dr. Brzezinski were in office, I remember talking with Dr. Brzezinski about what an amazing person Jan Karski was and somebody that you respected and people that you respected are certainly ones that we all should, because you do not give that praise lightly. Then, I actually wrote a book also about the solidarity press, and I had gone to Poland and learned Polish to do it in 1981 and already people were talking a little bit about what the changes were and who were the really important figures, and there were a couple of journalists that asked me if I ever heard of Jan Karski. And then I come to Georgetown to teach and what happened was when Professor Karski retired, I actually was asked to teach the courses that he taught: Modern Foreign Governments, the Communist part of it. And it was very difficult shoes to fill because he had earned such amazing respect from his students and I was very

honored. There was no way to follow –you could follow him but not replace him, so I felt very close to him and I was also honored when I was asked to write the forward to the new addition of the book. Now, to your question – what happened was that I, my most recent book, I was trying to examine my own family story but also to understand what really happened in World War II, how is it possible that the British and French made a deal over the heads of the Czechoslovaks with the Germans and Italians and sold Czechoslovakia down the river. And generally decisions that were made and then the third layer of the book is basically about the difficulty of making moral decisions, that in fact we all think everything is black and white, it's often gray, and the various choices that people made during the war and how did they behave and I mentioned in the book some obvious choices that were wrong and some that were very difficult for people to make and especially those people who decided to put themselves out on behalf of others without fully understanding what the effects of it might be some really personal bravery, and of not hiding and of really putting themselves out there and what you do, at least I did, as I was looking at these various cases you ask yourself, how would I have behaved? And I'm not sure that we all would come up with the kinds of pride that Jan Karski legitimately could have in the things that he did. One of the things that, as I was looking at the evidence about World War II and why not enough was done to first protect the Jews and then liberate the Jews, part of the issue was that people said we didn't know anything about it, which actually was not true, because Jan Karski had in fact managed through, and it's all described in his book, be able to get out and give a message and one of the things we deal with today is when people say well we don't really know what's going on inside countries. We now know everything that is going on inside countries. So what are our responsibilities? And I do think that Jan Karski was somebody who understood what the responsibilities of those who know the truth what they need to do and what they need to say and he made those honorable decisions, at great threat to himself, and I think the capability of knowing right from wrong and having that kind of courage not to be rewarded with anything because I think the interesting part about it well at least when I knew him was great pride and elegance but also modesty, in terms of not expecting to be praised for what he had done. The other lesson out of my book is that despite terrible things happening that there is a great resilience in the human spirit and especially when people know that there are those who care about them somewhere and I think that Jan Karski also really exhibited that resilience in human spirit of being brave himself, making the right choices, understanding that he was working on behalf of others, and then coming to this country and showing such amazing resilience. As I said, I think that I could never fill his shoes, but I was honored to follow him.

Clapping.

Dean Lancaster: So I'd like to turn to Dr. Brzezinski on my right. You know, there's probably no one in this town who is better at insightful analysis of foreign policy, of grand strategy, than Dr. Brzezinski. So I wanted to ask you a question, really with the two parts. How effective do you see the Polish Underground having been, because a lot of Karski's story is about participating in the underground? And what was their impact on influencing the outcome of the war?

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: Before I respond, let me also share just a brief, personal recollection because we all have had, in different ways, contacts with Jan Karski. I first met him as a teenager, and when he was on a mission to America, to alert America to what was happening over there. And he came to dinner

at my father's house. I was just a teenager, but I was there. And what I remember from that evening is only one thing. At one point in the course of the discussion, my father asked him, "What is happening to the Jews?" particularly in eastern Poland, which was occupied by the Nazis after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The Soviets had already seized half of Poland as many of you remember, in a joint effort with the Nazis. And he simply said, "They're all being killed." And what I remember was this kind of stunning reaction from my father, who was always very much engaged and who had very strong feelings against antisemitism. He said, "What do you mean? What do you mean they're all being killed?" He says, "Well, I've just said, they're all being killed." So my father says, "Well you mean children, and women, and older people?" He says, "I've told you, they're all being killed." And I remember that to this day, that and his wrists, because his wrists had been slashed after the Nazis captured him and before he was rescued by the Underground, which is in itself a story. But he tried to kill himself because he was afraid that during the interrogation, he would give away the fact that he was a secret emissary to the West, to alert the West about what was happening. That memory stayed with me, and subsequently I met him just a few times, but it was clear to me that this was a man whose entire life was dominated by two overwhelming passions: Poland and the Holocaust. Poland, because he fought for it and he risked his life many times, because as a courier he went back and forth from occupied Poland all the way to Great Britain and back through a variety of really adventurous expeditions. And the Holocaust, because that was the most searing confrontation with evil, that he felt compelled to share with the world. And I think his two greatest enemies in this context were of course the Nazis first of all, but secondly indifference, indifference. Indifference in the outside world, to which he went bearing this incredible message, and by and large, in most cases, not getting that much of a response, and that lingered with him and shaped his life, and made him a bit of a recluse in the last phases of his life. Now, as far as the Underground is concerned, of which he was much of a part, first of all as the book says, this was a remarkable and unique accomplishment in all of Europe, because the Underground literally created an underground state, with leadership, with courts, with secret universities, with military training, with sabotage, with assassination, and with intelligence. And I think its greatest contribution to the war as a whole was actually in the area of intelligence. It was the Polish Underground that provided the British with enormously detailed information about the Nazi plans to invade the Soviet Union in the middle of 1941, so that did not come as a surprise to the British. The British tried to share it with Stalin, but Stalin rejected it as a provocation. And the other, maybe even equally important intelligence contribution, was alerting the British to the fact that in the seaport of Peenemünde on the Baltic, the Nazis had organized a major production facility for the creation of ballistic missiles, not sub-guided but ballistic missiles which make V-bombs that eventually then were unleashed on London shortly after the invasion, so not soon enough to really be devastating, but still enough to impose a great deal of suffering on the British. The Poles learned about that; they penetrated the facility where there were forced laborers from Poland and they informed the British about it and then, even more stunning than that was that while Nazis were experimenting with these, they would fire them from the Baltic seacoast eastward towards the middle of Poland because they thought that was the most secure trajectory. And one of these V-missiles failed to explode, and the Underground quickly learned about that and managed to organize the local military unit in that particular provincial area near some villages, to quickly seize this rocket and to hide it in a nearby water, there was this water, some river flowing by, and after the Nazis came and searched for days and days and days and couldn't find it and left, they then excavated it, and the British, with the

help of Polish pilots, flew an aircraft to Poland which actually landed on a field not far away. The Underground then transported this missile on a horse-drawn carriage, camouflaged, placed it in the plane, and it flew back to Great Britain and delivered this prototype, which helped the British enormously in developing countermeasures. So he was a man who was a witness to the most unprecedented killing in the history of warfare. He was also a witness to an amazing act of patriotic resistance by the whole society, so he had a unique life. It was very compartmentalized. The Polish dimension was part of it, the Holocaust was another dimension. The Polish dimension was a source of pride; the Holocaust was a source of disappointment with indifference.

Dean Lancaster: Thank you. *Clapping*. Rabbi White, this is a segue to a question I wanted to ask you. What is your appreciation of Jan Karski's role in bringing the Holocaust to the attention of world leaders and in the long run, how are his efforts viewed by those who still, all of us, are concerned about "never again"?

Rabbi Harold White: I'd like to share two remembrances about Jan Karski. The first concerned my inviting him to be a homilist at the Yom HaShoah commemoration, commemorating the Holocaust, and he agreed to it. The reason he agreed to it, and he said had been asked very often to speak about the Holocaust, so often that he cared not to, but the reason that he came was that we commemorated the Holocaust with the Armenian community. And this impressed him because he felt that the retelling of the Holocaust, of the Shoah, was so significant to make students aware of the fact that holocausts existed in the past and existed in the present. And I'll never forget his homily, because he began by saying, "I didn't do enough." And he repeated it, "I didn't do enough." At that point, the service was held at Dahlgren Chapel. He turned to the Blessed Sacrament and said, "I hope that Christ forgives me for not having done enough." I asked him about his silence, why he didn't write or speak about the Holocaust for many years. And he said, "I was atoning. My silence was an atonement for the fact that I didn't do enough." He's one of the most humble people that I've ever encountered. His message was exceedingly significant from the point of view of theology, not only Jewish theology but all theologies, and that was how can you believe in a God after the Holocaust? And he and I had many, many discussions about this. He had read numerous books about the Holocaust. He'd read Richard Rubenstein's book *After Auschwitz*, where Rubenstein says that after the Holocaust we can no longer believe in a theistic God, a God who intervenes in human history, and that disturbed him. He was also very much different from Elie Wiesel, who in his book *Night* has the major character saying, "Where is God?" Karski believed that the big question is, "Where is Man?" And he was very instrumental for the beginning of a course at Georgetown called "Theological Implications of the Holocaust." He was a man of deep faith. He was very concerned about how future generations of students would look at the Holocaust and think about the Holocaust in their religious faith. Another book that he shared with me was a book that was written by a young Israeli journalist after the Six Day War. His name is Muki Tsur. And in this book, Tsur says that life after the Holocaust is like living on a seesaw. On one end of the seesaw is Auschwitz. On the other side of the seesaw is Hiroshima. And he believed very deeply that somehow in some way we must find a median position. His impact on Jewish thought was very, very significant because he said that we have to retell the story of the Holocaust over and over again to make people aware of the reality of holocausts within our society. I remember him as a noble human being, but most of all as a humble

person. I'd like to just conclude with just another personal remembrance that I have of him. I once asked him, he was very close to Elie Wiesel, "What is the most significant book that Elie Wiesel has written?" And he said, "It's a book called *Gates of the Forest*." And in that book there is a parable. It's a parable of a prophet, in many ways Jan Karski reminded me of the biblical prophets. He was a loner; no one would listen to him; people rejected his message. And in this parable, prophet goes into the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and those cities are the cities of Nazi Germany. And the prophet is encountered by a resident of the cities. And the resident looks at the prophet and says, "Where are you going?" And he says, the prophet says, "I'm going into your cities." "Why are you going into these cities?" "Because I want to implore you, to repent, to change your ways." And the resident says, "No! We really like what we're doing." But the prophet persists in going in, and the resident grabs him by his cloak and says, "I thought I told you not to go in. You won't change us." And the prophet answered, "I'm going in, so you won't change me." And that describes Jan Karski to me. After all of these horrendous experiences, he came out of that tragedy with a sense of hope. He was a deeply religious man. He once said to me, "You know, the big issue of our time is not belief, it's not credo, it's faith. And faith for him was the ability to take the credo, take a belief, and concretize it into an action of love.

Clapping.

Dean Lancaster: While we're here on the campus of Georgetown University and this conversation seems to me raises a question, how do we teach our young people the lessons of Jan Karski's life? Now, Bob Billingsely and his friends have taken one action, which is to plan to purchase the book, *The Secret State*, for our students and we trust that they will read the book and enjoy it as well as we have, but it's a bigger question. How do we teach the lessons of his life? And I'd like to just put that out there on the table and see if any of our panelists want to respond or want to add anything else to this conversation. Mr. Ambassador?

Ryszard Schnepf: Well, the contemporary lesson that we can draw on an everyday basis teaches us this never enough to spread the lessons, spread the idea that Jan Karski was living with, which means that the book, the meaning with the young people. But this story never ends. I mean, if you look around and look at the intolerance and still, lack of understanding between people just because they don't want to know another man. That means that there's a great job in front of us, perhaps next year, which is Jan Karski's year, will lead us to more efforts and go around not only here in the United States but also in Poland because we do plan things to happen in Poland and other countries in Europe just to understand that Jan Karski is not a hero of Poland only, he's a hero for humanity, European, American, and perhaps other countries, so let's go with this idea farther not only to those places that we know and that can easily understand his message.

Dean Lancaster: So I'm going to go back, this is an old teaching technique; I'm going to go back and forth so, Madeleine, I can feel energy coming from Madeleine and energy coming from Dr. Brzezinski.

Madeleine Albright: One of the comments that I made in my initial remarks is that what was so remarkable about him is that he took a stand and he reported on it and at a time when there were people who denied that anything like the Holocaust was happening and despite the fact as Zbigniew said

that there was indifference to it, at least he had gotten the message out. I have now spent a lot of my life looking at what happens when people are being murdered or ethnically cleansed not for anything they have done but for who they are, and we spent a lot of time on the Balkans for the same reason in terms of what was happening in Bosnia and Kosovo. And slowly in the international system something that has emerged is a concept called “responsibility to protect.” We no longer can make excuses about the fact that we don’t know what’s happening in some country, as I said earlier, we know everything about what’s going on everywhere. And when the leader of a country is not only not protecting his people but deliberately killing them, then there is a question if the capability exists, which is how to protect the “responsibility to protect”? When I... Dr. Brzezinski and I have spent a large portion of our life talking about the differences between the Poles and the Czechs, but I very much have spent my time now looking at the underground in Czechoslovakia and also thinking a lot about what happened there, and how the Czechs got betrayed, the Czechoslovaks. And one of the statements was by Neville Chamberlain, which is “Why should we care about people in a faraway place with unpronounceable names?” And I think that there are lessons in that for us now where we have the possibility of helping people in faraway places with unpronounceable names, not for anything they have done but for who they are, and for me that is the lesson very much that comes out of Jan Karski’s life and his decisions to tell the truth and to convey them and to make clear that we do have a responsibility for each other.

Clapping.

Dean Lancaster: Dr. Brzezinski—

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: Madeleine referred to the differences between Poles and Czechs, and of course she was right in what she said, and that in some ways I think I’m a better judge of that issue.

Madeleine Albright: Yes, that’s true.

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: Because I’m married to a Czech woman. But more seriously, you know when you reflect on what was said here, which is evocative and terribly powerful, and when one thinks in that connection of a person one knew, one begins to have a sense, at least I do, of the limits of human compassion, of the limits of our ability as humans to identify with the sufferings of other. If it’s intimate, if it’s close, if it’s within our eyesight, or if it touches someone we love, we are compassionate, mostly, we’re decent and responsive. But there are such limits to our ability, and we all suffer from it. I can visualize the Holocaust in part, because I was a child during World War II, and Karski brought it home to us in a dramatic way. I have to confess for example and this thought occurred to me right now as the Rabbi was speaking. I find it very difficult to visualize and kind of identify myself since, the suffering in Hiroshima. It’s kind of far and I don’t mean geographically. It’s just kind of difficult to identify with it. And then, go farther. I was responsible for national security. I had to coordinate our response in the event of a nuclear war. We once had an incident along those lines and I knew that if things went wrong, 85 million people would be dead in 8 hours. It’s too big. You just can’t relate yourself to it. So you then draw back, and you operate on the basis of routine, and experience, and dedication, and you don’t reach out. So I ask myself quite often, when we talk about the Holocaust and Karski, you know why is it that the West didn’t react? At the risk of really being controversial and if I may be that way, there is this

fantastic article by Max, what was his name, the New York Times correspondent, what? Max Frankel, on the 100th anniversary of the *New York Times*, pointing out that [the New York Times reported on the massacre of the Jews in Europe only twice during the entire war](#). That wasn't being cruel, that it wasn't even being indifferent, I think the people who were running the *New York Times* knew, but they weren't able to reach out to it and they thought there might be downsides to it, so it wasn't important. Literally. The public was not aware this was happening. Only until the concentration camps were finally reached and liberated. So I think we all as human beings have this perhaps instinctive sheltering effect, in which we take shelter behind indifference because otherwise the sacrifice that we would have to make and the responsibilities we would have to assume would probably be beyond the most of us. This is incidentally what makes Karski so unique.

Dean Lancaster: Rabbi did you want to say a few words?

Rabbi White: Yes. I remember Jan asked me what my family's reaction was to the Holocaust. And I shared a story with him. I was a pre-teenager during the Holocaust. And I remember the sense in it, and it's a very painful incident for me, in movie theaters there used to be Warner Pathe news. You went to see a movie and you saw news. And in this newscast there were pictures of what was happening in Germany: swastikas, breaking of glass windows, Jews wearing stars. And as we watched them my parents said, "We're leaving." And we left the theater. And I realized that my parents either were sheltering me from the horrors or maybe they were deluding themselves, because you're quite correct. *The New York Times*, it didn't appear in the first section. It only appeared in the second section. So one of the things that I think we can do is to teach the evils of indifference, silence, and self-delusion, but one of the things that I would strongly recommend is that we make the film *Shoah* more visible within our communities. The Holocaust was a bitter experience for him, but even a greater experience was the reaction to the film. And I remember him coming and speaking to me about it, the fact that people were accusing him of lying and coming up with things that were not real. That was a very, very bitter experience for him. And in that film, you really capture the true Karski, the honest man, the man of truth, and the man of courage.

Dean Lancaster: Well thank you and I think we now have some time for questions or comments from the audience. And if I may suggest, if you wish to make a comment or ask a question, please introduce yourself and you might direct it to the panel member you would like to hear from. We have microphones up above. I can't see you very well because I have all the light in my eyes, but I will try to do my best to see you if you would put your hand up if you have a comment or a question. Who will break the ice?

John McLees: Hello, my name is John McLees. With some trepidation, I move to respond to...

Dean Lancaster: Can you introduce yourself please?

John McLees: My name is John McLees, from Chicago. With some trepidation, I move to respond to the remarks of the rabbi and of Professor Brzezinski about the limits of human ability to respond to situations like this, and it's brought up by a comment that a Jewish friend of mine made to me today, talking about President Obama going to Israel, to talk about the situation in Israel as it has evolved, not

Comment [h1]: This is not true (if this is what Frankel said); The Times *did* report on what was happening to the Jews on multiple occasions; you can see these articles in the *Times* archives online. However, these articles often fell on the back pages, or second sections of the paper (or were really small segments), so were not often read.

only with respect to the interests of the Israeli people but the lack of compassion shown by Jews and Israeli Jews to the plight of the Palestinians. And I'm wondering if it isn't an act of courage to bring that up in the context of Jan Karski's memory. And to ask, what is it that we can do, each of us, inspired by Jan Karski, to address the indifference, the silence, and the self-delusion that results from the current state of affairs in the state of Israel?

Dean Lancaster: Who would take that, I think that your name was mentioned...

Rabbi White: I'll take it. I'm a member of three peace groups in relation to this issue. I've been very forthright in that, and unfortunately within the United States, we get the impression that no one is protesting in Israel, and that's totally fallacious. You know, there's a very strong peace movement in Israel, much stronger than in the United States, so the issue is not in relation to Israelis. The issue is in relation to the world Jewish community, and I think you're quite correct from that point of view. But that requires courage, a great deal of courage, because within the Jewish community today, I see almost the civil war and a civil war on the issue of Israel. That's something new. But that type of confrontation is very positive, and it is occurring, and I think there's hope in that area.

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: Well I would only add this, I think the question then to us is what is our responsibility, as Americans, what indeed is America's responsibility? I think it is very easy to say this problem is not solvable; the Palestinians and the Israelis will never compromise, so we have to pull back and just watch. I've always felt, and I feel strongly that it's a moral obligation for us to be engaged, and it's a strategic necessity for us to be engaged, because leaving that issue to the parties themselves is to leave them with a burden that is probably beyond each of them to solve, and certainly not two of them together at the same time. Human nature is just too complex, so I think there is a moral responsibility and I have to say I'm looking forward to this week, because I think it will tell us a little more about the President. He, I think, has been deeply dedicated to the idea of peace. I suspect, I think, and I also hope, that he was diverted from that course, by the domestic difficulties that we have been facing. I hope he will resume that effort, because I think that effort is morally right. The Jews of Israel deserve it, the Palestinians of Palestine deserve it, and the fact is the United States is the only one who can make the process go forward, so I think there is a moral imperative here, but I will make my own judgment as to what I think is rightly after next week.

Dean Lancaster: Mr. Ambassador, do you have anything to add?

Ryszard Schnepf: Well, I know this is not my subject, probably. If I may refer to something it's the possibility of compassion and the individual responsibility. We consume easily, the big numbers, talking about what Professor Brzezinski said before that, this is not a response to your question, but we are easy to accept the statistics when we talk about 500,000 people that lost their life or a million or even two. Did anybody see two million or three million people at the same place? No. Only the personalized, individual story about everybody's life, focused on a faith of man, a woman, or a child, can get to our imagination, and to share the pain and then responsibility for what has happened.

Dean Lancaster: Secretary.

Madeleine Albright: I think that this is an issue that the President is very concerned about because, as Dr. Brzezinski said, he is a compassionate man and he has, he tried initially in the first term, I think it's very important that on the first trip of his second term is actually to not only Israel, but he is going to the West Bank, and I can only tell you my own experiences that when one goes to the West Bank and meets with students who say, "Tell me what my future is" and you can't answer the question, then you really wonder what the responsibilities of the United States are. Dr. Brzezinski and I share many things; one is actually spending time at Camp David, dealing with these particular issues. Your result was better than mine. If I were to ask any of you whether you would like to go to Camp David, you would probably say, yes. I can tell you after two weeks in the rain with the Israelis and the Palestinians I don't care if I ever go back. But I think that these are very hard decisions to be made and the United States can in fact present plans, which I think various administrations have done, but ultimately it's the Israelis and Palestinians who have to make the decisions and the U.S. can bridge and condition in a number of different words that are out there, but I think we have to understand that they have to make the decisions, and I know about the peace movements in Israel, and I think that that is not reported enough, and I do think that is something we need to talk about more. It is not a mono—Palestinians are not monolithic and neither are the Israelis. And therefore, that is the kind of thing we need to focus on more.

Dean Lancaster: There's somebody down here in front. We'll do the front and then we'll do the back. There's a mic coming.

Wanda Urbanska: I'm Wanda Urbanska, President of the Jan Karski Educational Foundation. Obviously we are thrilled with this great occasion today. My question is for you, Dean Lancaster, I understand you recently read Karski's book, and I'm wondering, you said that you couldn't put it down, you read it for 18 hours, what is it about the book that so inspired you, that kept you reading, and also do you think this will spark a renaissance of interest in Polish history?

Dean Lancaster: Well, thank you for the question, I thought I was going to escape being interrogated today, and that was sort of a right responsibility of a moderator. I picked up the book. You know, I hate to say this but I try not to read books that are too exciting because it means I will stop doing everything else, and I have a lot of everything else's to do. So I picked up this book, and of course exactly that happened. Why was it so engaging? It was engaging at several levels, and one of them of course was just the story. I mean, his incredible life and his escapes, and the experiences that he had. I think the second level was the issues that he raised in the book, which we've all been talking about here, the inhumanity of man to man, and often the humanity of man to man, and I think those are fascinating and very evident. And then, the book raised in my mind a number of interesting questions, the fascinating story of the Polish Underground and how it was that that was so effective. There were no quislings in Poland. It says something to you about the Polish people, it seems to me. And then I was left with a thought, at the end of this book, because it ended in 1944, I guess it was published in 1944, it ended I think in 1943. How brave so many people were and how disappointed so many people must have been when after the war, the Soviets replaced the Nazis. Now maybe that's a harsh way of asking the question but I was troubled by that, but one of the things the Ambassador said reminded me that many Polish citizens, and Jan Karski as well, lived long enough to see the final change, the democratization of Poland, and so perhaps many people, who sacrificed so much finally were able to see the Poland that they had

dreamed about. And so, it was a wonderful book on a number of different levels and I realize you may be thinking that I'm being paid by the Georgetown University Press to make this statement, but I do think it's a compelling book, and I'm a little surprised we don't have a movie about it. I gather people are talking about it, but it's immensely visual, and so maybe we do have a movie about it, I'm hoping it will happen. So those are my reactions. Did you want to say something about; are you going to tell us about a movie maybe? We need a microphone down here. And, you might introduce yourself.

Kaya Mirecka-Ploss: My name is Kaya Mirecka-Ploss. I knew Jan Karski for 32 years. In the last 8 years, he was my closest friend and companion, and I am also the executor of his last will and testament. And I am surprised no book about his private life was ever written. He was a very interesting and tragic figure. What kind of professor was he, I mean there are students he taught for 40 years, why isn't there a private book I spoke in Poland about it. Some people promised me. I spoke with Angieszka Holland about it 4 years ago; she spent with me few days and I was recording, recording about the private Jan Karski whom I knew, so I'm appealing to anybody who knows a good writer, to write a book about the private Jan Karski, who was just as interesting as that hero that we all know. Thank you very much.

Dean Lancaster: So we started with the gentleman there. Sorry to have derailed you, but now we're back.

Robert Leiber: I'm Robert Leiber, I am a professor of Government and Foreign Service here at Georgetown. Jan Karski was a colleague of mine in the government department before he retired. I used to have him lecture once a year to my large introductory International Relations class. But I want to amplify a remark and then take issue at something Zbigniew Brzezinski said. Jan, as a number of you said, was a modest man who blamed himself for not doing enough, and at one point in frustration about the lack of response, even by the Roosevelt administration, even mused once about how he ought to have done something dramatic including starving himself to death outside the White House in despair at President Roosevelt's failure to respond. The Roosevelt administration did very little that would have made a difference, when there were things they might've done, and this is where I want to take issue with Zbigniew Brzezinski, what you said about your family and Jan is eloquent and moving, but about the *New York Times* I'm afraid, it leaves out something ugly, which is that the editors and owners of the *New York Times* deliberately sat on the story. Information had become available. Anthony Eden made a statement to the British House of Commons in November 1942, thanks to information provided by the Polish Underground; it was a full and thoroughly detailed statement about the deliberate mass murder and the extermination of the European and Polish Jews. The *New York Times* sat on the story because of the particular antisemitism of the Jewish owners of the *New York Times*, which was an attitude held in certain circles. It wasn't just a matter of lack of information, but a preferred degree of deliberate antisemitism in the Roosevelt administration so that European Jews who might've been saved were not even allowed to use up the small available of quotas for them that existed during the war, and in this case the *New York Times* owners were deliberately sitting on the story rather than giving it attention it would've warranted.

Dean Lancaster: You have a comment?

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski: I wasn't casting stones; I was merely stating the facts. You are entitled to your interpretations; you may be partially right.

Dean Lancaster: There's a hand in the air right there.

Robert Goldstein: My name is Robert Goldstein. I'm a graduate at the Foreign Service School. I attended Dr. Karski's classes. And I'm here with a friend of mine, Tim Francis, also a graduate at the school. We were able to spend a little bit of time with Dr. Karski, having lunch a few times, long after we had both graduated. I wanted to say something just not any way as serious-minded as my seat-mate just said that more to the question of why hasn't there been a book written about Dr. Karski's private life, interest in a film of that sort. At one of these luncheons, probably 20 years ago, my friend Tim and I broached the subject with Dr. Karski of why aren't you interested in exploring the idea of a movie being made out of this particular book, *Story of a Secret State*, with which we were both very familiar? And at the time he was very adamant that he was not interested in doing anything like that, exploiting that sort of possibility, now it could be that in us he saw two people that did not have the ability to deliver that kind of film that he was interested in, but I think he was very serious at least at that point in his life, of saying he was not at all interested in pursuing any sort of, or having anyone pursue on his behalf, any sort of Hollywood version, film version of this particular book, but I would agree with the earlier statement that I wish something like this would be done.

Dean Lancaster: There's a gentleman right here.

Władysław Zachariasiewicz: I want to thank the panel; this is fantastic; I learned so much about Karski, whom I never know.

Dean Lancaster: Maybe you could introduce yourself?

Władysław Zachariasiewicz: Before the war, louder? I'm sorry. I happened to know Janek Karski before the war in Warsaw. We met in a nice coffee place talking about Polish politics, he was always interested in what was going on in the world, but I never expected that Karski, whom I had known as a good friend would be a hero in the future. I spent most of the time in a Siberian camp under Stalin's **care**, so I lost contact with Karski and other of my friends, but when I, after the war, when I met with him, I learned that he was—he became a hero to me. And he felt so deeply for the Jewish cause, that sometimes when we have a conversation about it, I ask, "Do you more like Polish or Jewish?" He told me, "I have no clear answer to this, no understand[ing] for this." Because here this tragedy which happened to the Jewish people was so deeply in his heart, in his mind, he lived with this. As a student, was very ambitious. He started a career in the Polish Foreign Service, and to my surprise he was in the division of colonial policy. Poland had no colony, but there was some dreaming about having some colony. Janek Karski was very impressed by this, was excellent student. Probably he would make a great career in the Foreign Service. Unfortunately the situation became different and Janek Karski was in a very elegant unit, so-called – horse artillery (()): it's half cavalry, half artillery – very elegant unit, and Janek Karski was also ((proud)) about this, always elegant, well-dressed, made good life, you know, a very capable, ambitious student. What happened later, for me this is the whole reason, and we spoke often about Poland at this time, we are fortunate that we were alive, you know what Karski did, he ((...)) every day— incredible. When I

Comment [h2]: Not sure about this word, maybe 'camps'?? I could barely hear him.

Comment [h3]: Can't comprehend this part.

think about it—the Holocaust and—I was lucky to go out alive; my life was much easier, but I learned much about Karski tonight, I tell you, and I really am grateful for arranging this panel. It was fantastic. I have secret feeling for Madeline Albright who is such a fantastic friend of Poland. This has nothing to do with Karski, but I have to say something, when Polish Ambassador Koźmiński was leaving after his term, Albright arranged a fantastic reception for him, and I participated in it, and I was so impressed about it, and I was really admiring you. Koźmiński is doing fantastic—ambassador, professor, not here today, he’s part of this organization, Polish-American Freedom Foundation. Great person really and you are fantastic. ((...)) But once more, many, many thanks for arranging this panel, it was really a great experience, I listened every word, and I say, to me, Karski was another person, really, what you told us.

Comment [h4]: Too quiet to hear.

Ryszard Schnepf: If I may only, *Panie Władysławie, Pan pozwoli, że ja Pana przedstawię, po prostu publiczności.* I, this is my pleasure and honor to introduce to you Mr. Władysław Zachariasiewicz, who just spoke to you, prisoner of Siberian camps. We, last year, we celebrated 101 years. *Clapping.* He’s a living memory of our history and our friends.

Dean Lancaster: So I’d like to ask Paul Tagliabue to make a comment or ask a question. Can somebody? Ah, there we go.

Paul Tagliabue: I was going to try to answer a question I think you asked, which was what could we do at Georgetown to bring to our students the lessons of Jan Karski. And it occurred to me in listening to Rabbi White. He spoke about a course, I don’t know if it was at Georgetown or someplace else.

Rabbi White: It was at Georgetown. The first person to teach it was **Michael Berenbaum, who was the first director of the Holocaust Memorial Museum.**

Comment [h5]: This is actually incorrect information; Arthur Rosenblatt was the Holocaust Memorial Museum’s first director (1986-1988). Michael Berenbaum was the Project Director for the Permanent Exhibition. Maybe we can include a footnote in the transcript to correct this??

Paul Tagliabue: And I think he said that the course was the “Theological Implications of the Holocaust.” I think there’s a course that the School of Foreign Service, under your stewardship could develop coming out of this conversation and many other conversations about Jan Karski, which would be something like “The Moral and Policy Implications of Karski’s Actions,” because as Secretary Albright and others have pointed it out, and the question that the speakers pointed out, it’s not just Israel and the Palestinians; it was Bosnia, it’s Syria, it’s many other parts of the world. And it would be a phenomenal course; it really is the universal lessons of Karski, which the Ambassador talked about at the beginning. It would really be a neat thing and it would be even neater if you could mix it in and put in online as part of Georgetown’s contribution to the humanities, as part of the Harvard, ((MIT)), make it something available to people around the world. *Clapping.*

Comment [h6]: Readers may not know what this refers to; we could footnote a link to their website if you would like:
<https://www.edx.org/school/harvardx/allcourses>

Dean Lancaster: I was just hoping Madeleine would offer to teach it, but we’ll have to work on that. You may know, by the way, that Georgetown has joined one of these organizations that produces massive online open source courseware, and we are looking for good ideas, and this one would be, it seems to me, very good and an interesting idea. *Clapping.* So, Bob Billingsley – does someone have a microphone for...

Bob Billingsley: I’m going to go to the other extreme, someone who just spoke was 100 years old, are there any students here or grad students here, or students that are around 24 or 25 years old? Okay,

would you stand up? Just stand up. Just— Stand up. I think the message here, is he did, in that book, what he did, when he was your age, and that's the appeal, because Dr. Brzezinski knows Karski when he's 30, I know him when he's 52, others know him when he is, and he's like this movable feast, this Narnia, because we knew him as a professor, and he starts off in class and he looks like Paul Henreid in Casablanca, he's so elegant, and then he becomes our Polish uncle later on, out of a Lubitsch movie. But he chose to do what he did and there are aspects of this book, my friend Dan Henniger refers to him as the real James Bond, okay? He does this, when he's your age. And also, too, he does it, his country has been for hundreds of years, the Poles don't have a country. In 1919, they get a country, and he is enthusiastic about that, he's like Americans in the war of 1812, with how they feel about this new country. And that excitement about it, and all of a sudden, that idealism catches up with him, and he's a remarkable blend of an idealist, but a great pragmatist, and then he sees that country in the flower of its youth, in its dramatic moments, in those heady moments, getting crushed, and he goes on. And then, after all that he's been through, he comes back in his forties and fifties, and what does he choose to be with? People your age. And he doesn't have any kids. So thousands and thousands of Georgetown kids become his kids. And I think that's his real attraction to kids that are here. When he did this, he's one of you, and then he dedicated his life to you.

Clapping.

Dean Lancaster: Thank you very much. We're coming to the end of this. I hope you'll find, as I did, fascinating and enlightening and inspiring panel and discussion. I would like to ask Father John Langan of the Society of Jesus to provide us with some closing appreciation and reflection on Jan Karski, so Father Langan?

Father Langan: Thank you very much, Dean Lancaster. It would be hard to move beyond the previous remarks that have been made. I will refer back for just a moment, picking up on a question of relating to students, to something that Secretary Albright put in her forward. Picking off the point, that "Jan Karski was 25. He was a well-educated, popular man, fond of food, pretty women, and fast horses." Fairly well applicable to at least half of the Georgetown population. Maybe the fast horses would have to be replaced by suitable modernized forms of transportation, but the project that's been proposed and a lot of our reflection on the value of Karski's life, has to start with a recognition of his humanity, his ordinariness, his youth. He was turned into a messenger, a courier, an immensely difficult task, and he had to show great courage and generosity of spirit. He was in fact bridging very difficult distances: the distances imposed by the Nazis, the distances that had ground up over centuries of European culture between Jews and Christians, and that's a task in which he is one contributor. This year we're celebrating the 50th anniversary of the death of another very important contributor in bridging that distance, John the XXIII. It's important, from where I sit, as a member of the Jesuit Community, to acknowledge that Karski was Catholic, and that that's part of his importance for crossing this important and tragic divide, and beginning to create a new future for Jews and Christians together, to move from being mistrustful, suspicious enemies to being brothers and sisters working for a more just world. To be, in what is one of the buzz words of the contemporary Jesuit education, "men and women for others." When confronted with radical evil, Karski did not take refuge in fantasy or in flight, but in courageous and generous action. He showed himself, if I could fall back for just a moment, on the 19th century Jesuit

poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. Hopkins has a vision of a kind of apocalyptic fire, almost Holocaust-like in its intensity. And then, a key moment, he's summing this up:

"Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
immortal diamond
Is immortal diamond."

Jan Karski was one of those people who showed himself to be immortal diamond. We are charged with trying to shape young people in the confidence that they too, in certain critical moments, can be immortal diamond.

Clapping.

Dean Lancaster: Well, I think this brings us to the end of this event. I'd like to thank all of you for being with us this afternoon. I'd like to thank the panel for providing us with such insightful reminiscences and analyses and thoughts about the meaning and life of Jan Karski, and I think that we will probably go away remembering this event for a very long time. I would invite you, if you wish, to purchase the book *The Secret State*, outside of this auditorium as you leave, and to tell you that there is a display of books and memorabilia associated with Jan Karski in the Galleria of the Intercultural Center. So again, thank you all for being here, and good evening.

Clapping.