

“Jan Karski Memorial Dinner”

Estoril Political Forum 2016

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When I first met Jan Karski, in Washington DC, it was winter 1995/1996. Within a week or two since having moved in to this town I attended a mass at the Polish church in Silver Spring. As a newcomer I hardly knew anybody in the church. After the sermon the priest invited me over to his house for a Sunday dinner and a chat.

Across the table there sat a short, thin and dry man, elegant in the old way, but whose hands and joints bore signs of hard physical work. “Karski” – he barked and half raised to shake my hand, while holding a support stick in his other hand. “Karski?” I thought, “which Karski?” But he was the Jan Karski. Professor emeritus of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, and otherwise a legendary emissary of the Polish Underground State. He addressed me, originally, as “Mister colleague”, an old fashioned way of ambiguous acceptance, reluctant patronage, while keeping distance with the unknown yet apparent fellow. Only after a couple of years did we cross this symbolical threshold line dividing the officialdom from familiarity that allowed each of us to address another as “Mister Professor”, which sounds awful when translated into English, but conforms to the old Imperial Austro-Hungarian cultural tradition.

Karski was neither talkative, nor nice during this first meeting, and he was right, as we almost immediately disagreed on whether Russia will ever become a modern political system. I must admit to have been on the pessimistic side then, as I am today. Karski saw more positive elements in Yeltsin being reelected as Russia’s president.

Next week we met again. Karski occupied the front bench on the right side of the church. As the newcomer professor I was seated just behind him, in the second row. So each week, during the Sunday service, we were exchanging a handshake of peace. Soon, however, I got dinner invitation by Karski’s companion where we had an opportunity to disagree again. His views were those of *realpolitik*, his verbiage was very typically Washingtonian, as he used the imperatives “you must,” “they have to”, while mine was more cautiously scholastic when referring to geopolitical problems and conflicts. He had taught government, while I taught social movements. It was a difference between a balcony and a barricade, a difference of perspective, not of substance. But otherwise, as we spoke about the superpowers and the transformations of the world, we agreed that the political tectonics will be shaping the destiny of nations time and again. In many ways in my own writings until today I come back to these ruminations that we kept with Jan Karski back twenty years ago.

Jan Karski was a non-obvious hero of the twentieth century. Amidst the forthcoming liquidity of modernity, confronted with moral relativism he was the man of cardinal principles. Another emissary and his contemporary Washingtonian, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański looking back at Jan Karski's life-path from the 30-years perspective, found him "to be probably the most accurate in his political assessment of Poland's challenges". Karski, to be sure, was extremely concerned about the future role of Polish intelligentsia, and how to minimize the loss of human capital. "Politically, Poland- he used to say – has already been on the losing side of the War after the Tehran talks. But Polish politicians, instead of wishful thinking, should sit down around the table and decide how to [best] lose the war. We should think how to spare unnecessary losses and how to best prepare the country for the future." [Jankowski 446]

During WWII Karski was pessimistic about the future, and he said that there is no chance that Poland after war will be able to quickly reproduce the ranks of her intelligentsia. It will take years to create this class, he thought. He was also critical about the moral condition of the nation, pointing to the fact of catastrophically low demographic growth. Modest, restrained yet of clear political views Jan Karski is a figure whose life, whose many lives, would make many James Bond movies look pale. And yet his students at Georgetown hardly knew he had another life. Nor did they know that to complement his dismally low university paycheck Karski worked after hours as a builder, remodeling old houses. Hence his swollen hands that first attracted my attention together with his glowing eyes.

For Poland to have a Jan Karski memorial lecture here in Estoril, during the reputed Estoril Political Forum is a symbolic gesture. In him, as much as in the personalities of the two other brave and fearless envoys, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański (quoted above) and Jerzy Lerski, we recognize the responsibility and imagination of the early atlanticists, who crossed the Ocean and went to America in an attempt to bring the New World closer to the Old World, and to end the times of horror and disgrace for the humankind. We are proud and grateful to the city of Cascais and its Mayor, Mr. Carlos Careiras, to avail us the prime location for the statue that commemorates the three emissaries. We are great to the founder, Mr. Andre Jordan.

Atlanticism is vested in the principle of shared responsibilities, conservative values and collateral benefits of economic and social collaboration. It is also a realistic guarantee of European security. World War II was the time of destabilization, insecurity and myopia. It was the time of suffering and injustice. Understanding the Atlanticism as a form of guaranteeing mutual stability and security was a far-sighted intellectual strategy. Jan Karski, as much as others, frequently unknown, modest, young and bright people of his times made a small yet significant contribution to the multiple dividends that we, Europeans, enjoyed during the last half-century.

Atlanticism is a way of seeing the interdependence between development, democracy, defense and dignity. Karski understood it very well. He was a perennial envoy, a go-and-between, whose medium cool pictures of the Polish reality under German and Russian occupation were delivered with the fuse of emotions and moral trembling. His attempts at

analyzing the political, social, economic and moral situation in Poland were always directed outside of Poland herself, his work conducted in Poland as early as in the Fall of 1939 was meant to become a wake-up call for the Western governments. He was, to paraphrase our friend, Professor Joao Carlos Espada, a proponent of open elitism and gentlemanship. He understood well the essence of social structure and the relative role of intelligentsia in preserving the national character. From 1939 on Karski lamented the extinction of middle and upper classes, the bearers of conservatist morals and *moeurs* and the ongoing process of relativisation of the working classes under the German and Soviet occupation. Another of the emissaries, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański in his 1982 book *The courier from Warsaw* says that looking back from the perspective of 30 years Jan Karski was right and realist on most of his opinions pertaining to the post-war situation. He argued that the opposition would have to prepare the country for the future, limit the loss in the human capital and benefit for a long march towards national sovereignty. Jan Karski's life was subsequently molded by what Professor Joao Carlos Espada would call *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty*. He got an imprint of it by studying at Georgetown University, and he was even more profoundly molded by several decades of his academic work there. Unlike most American scholars, Karski never worked anywhere else, but Georgetown, he was never part of any other academic collective than Georgetown. He never lived outside of the Beltway, outside of Washington D.C. In a sense this has immunized him against, what Espada calls, moral and epistemological relativism, and what I call even more bluntly to be an epistemological vacuum. Karski's moral standards were solid-iron and he never actually gave in to the European "dogmatic rationalism". In this he was an American product, he acquired the American habits of the heart. He used to say that he has a love affair, a romance with America. In a sense, amidst the transformations in the intellectual culture of the West that took place from the late 1960s on, Karski appeared like a hopeless traditionalist and conservative. It protected his moral views from the dents of moral relativism, albeit at the expense of considerable isolation. He was cognitively reluctant to embrace modernity, as he was politically cautious to accept the "End of History" hypothesis, and as he was morally restrained to forget and to forego on the atrocities of the War.

Today, as we are meeting for the First Jan Karski Memorial Lecture, there is no better date to reiterate the dichotomy between the European and the Anglo-American perspectives on politics, morality, and on fate of nations. I am pleased to present to you Professor Krzysztof Szczerski of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Professor Szczerski currently serves as the Presidential Secretary of State in Charge for International Relations, which means that he is not only a politician, but that he is a one-person Policy Planning Staff in the Chancellery of the President. He is the scholar with the views, highly opinionated, strongly committed to core values of conservatism. He sees very strongly the dichotomy existing between the core European tradition, the European civilization and the dogmatic rationalism, as our friend Joao Carlos Espada would have called it. Let me call Espada again: "*Dogmatic rationalism reproduces itself, and gets wilder and wilder, then it is disconnected from the common sense and common people. [...]Because democracy in Europe is mainly perceived as an expression*

of a dogmatic rationalist project, and because dogmatic rationalism leads to relativism, non-relativist democrats in Europe struggle hopelessly to find a democratic platform against relativism". Szczerski sees it in a similar way, when he talks about doctrinal weeds that suffocate many European institutions. But, as he indicates, the grain that makes the essence of the European civilization is the dominant component of European societies. He is an outspoken critic of the Europeanist constructivism, progressivism and atheism, which over the past years have sought to use political methods to produce a new European man. If many today stand against the genetically modified organisms, Szczerski, if I may say, stands against the politically modified cultures. It is hard to say whether the culture wars of the late twentieth century are gradually coming to an end. They may as well continue. Likewise, it is hard to say whether the political and military confrontations will continue along the lines on the East or on the West of Poland. Szczerski - the realist – wants to preserve the most of the Anglo-American European liberal tradition. Szczerski – the realistic strategist looks at the dynamics of international situation in Europe. Two weeks before the Warsaw NATO Summit, Szczerski knows that the scenario of security in Europe has to be established on three prongs: on defense, deterrence and dialogue. He underlies the fact that European governments have to move away from the philosophy of giving people hope to the philosophy of international guarantees and military presence that will give people that hope. Jan Karski would have liked it, I surmise. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased to present to you the Secretary of State Professor Krzysztof Szczerski.