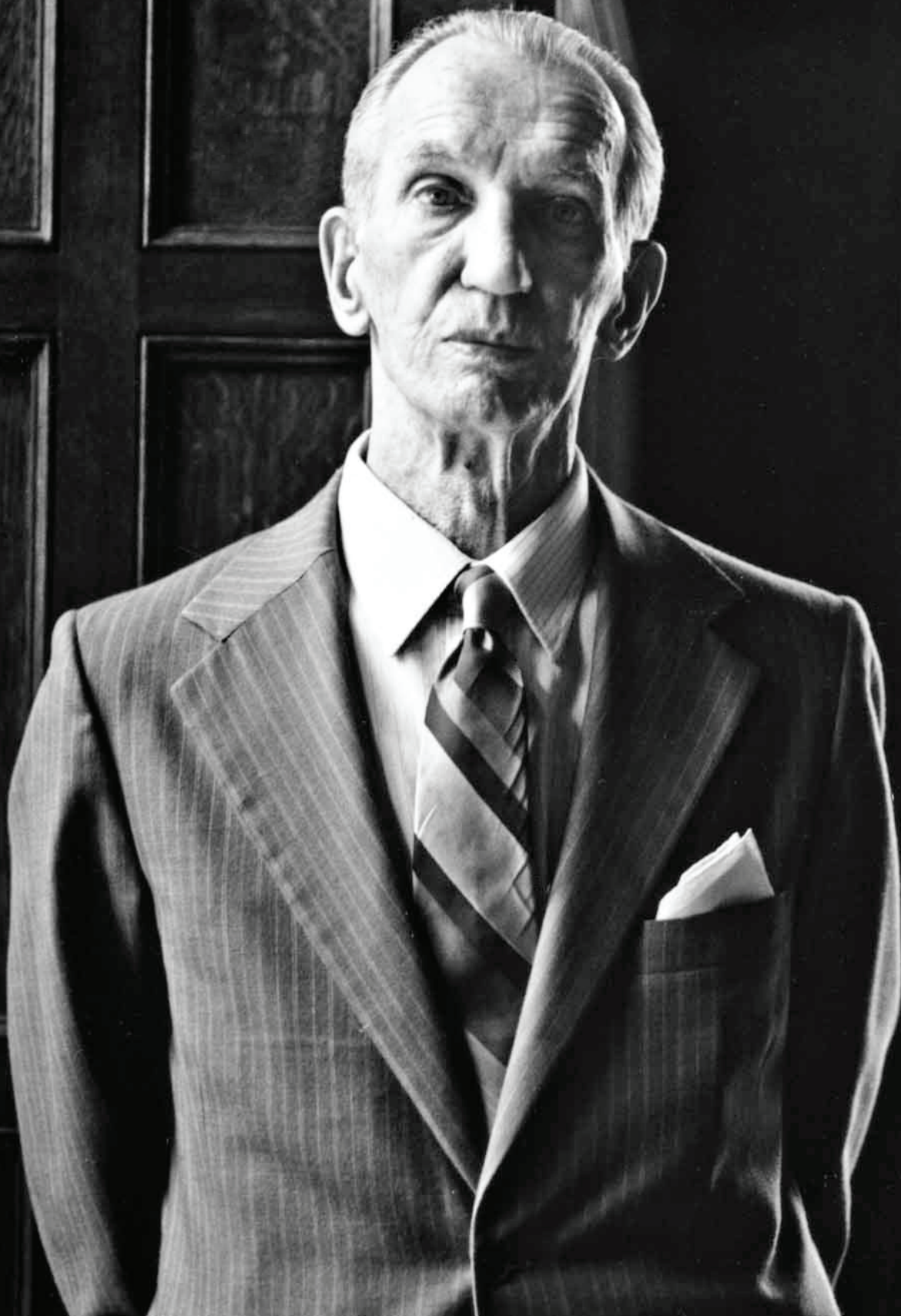


FALL 2013

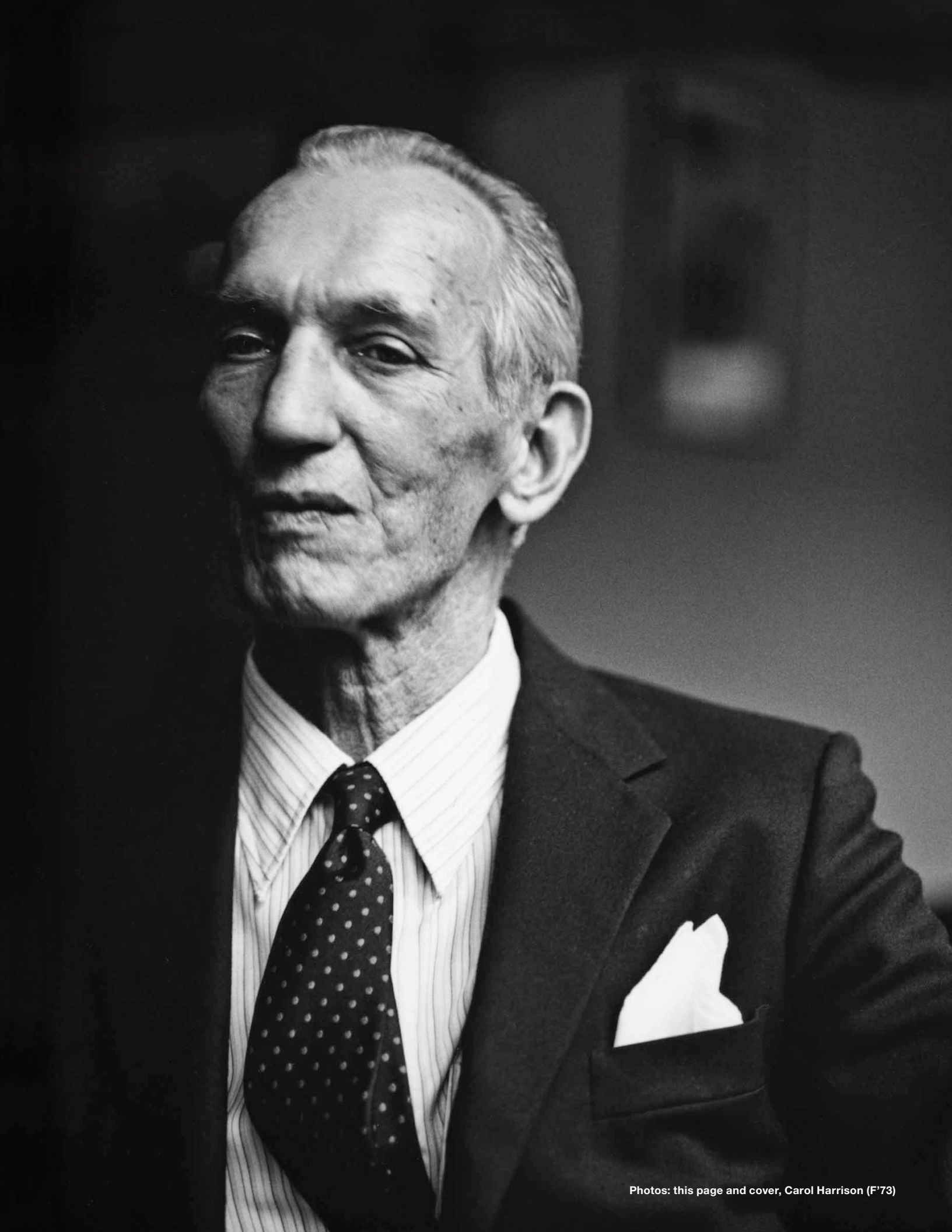
Georgetown

M A G A Z I N E



Humanity's Hero

As a Polish resistance fighter, Jan Karski warned the West of the Holocaust. At Georgetown, he became an icon for justice and compassion.



HUMANITY'S HERO

Jan Karski

by Sara Piccini

The man sits in a chair in front of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. He is impeccably dressed in a blue suit with a crisp white pocket square. He looks briefly at the camera filming him, then looks down again. He takes a deep breath. He begins to speak in heavily accented English, slowly, carefully. "Now—I go back 35 years."

He stops and becomes agitated, waving his hands and beginning to weep. "No, no, I don't go back," he says. He gets up from his chair and walks away. A camera at the end of a long corridor shows him at a distance, returning to his seat. He speaks again. He bears witness to the unspeakable.

The man is Jan Karski, giving testimony to French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann in October 1978 for the Holocaust documentary *Shoah*. Karski, who had worked for the Polish underground during World War II, witnessed firsthand the suffering of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto and at a transit point en route to Belzec concentration camp. Risking his life, he traveled through Nazi Germany, Occupied France and Spain to bring word of the Holocaust to Allied leaders in London and Washington, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was met with both disbelief and indifference.

"Karski was one of a small group who from the very beginning was absolutely clear about the special character of the Holocaust," said Timothy Snyder, Housum Professor of History at Yale and author of the best-selling *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*.

"He did something no one else did," Snyder said. "No one else combined firsthand knowledge of what was happening in the ghettos with access to world leaders. He's the only person who combined that in one life and in one record of achievement."

‘I Hope They Will Forget Me’

When Karski spoke to Lanzmann in 1978, Karski had been a professor at Georgetown for nearly three decades—a beloved teacher, a noted scholar of interwar Poland, a naturalized American citizen. Though his colleagues knew of his history, he refused to elaborate on it. “Even when we would have him out for drinks, even when we asked point blank, he’d shift the conversation,” said Karl Cerny, former chair of the government department and a friend of Karski’s since 1950.

“It was clear he wanted to put it behind him after the war,” said E. Thomas Wood, co-author of *Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust*. “He just wanted to start fresh and become an American.”

Most of Karski’s students were unaware of his heroic past. “He never revealed much about himself,” said Stephen Mull (F’80), current U.S. ambassador to Poland, who took Karski’s renowned Theory of Communism class. “We would ask, ‘Didn’t you come here from Poland?’” Mull recalled. “He would say, ‘Oh, it’s a long story.’”

In 1985, when *Shoah* premiered, Mull watched the documentary while posted in Poland with the U.S. Foreign Service. “All of a sudden, there was Jan Karski talking about his experience during World War II. It was a stunning revelation to see my professor, whom I had loved so much at Georgetown, and to find out what he had done. After that, I couldn’t get enough information about him.”

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel urged Karski to once again bear witness to the world. He persuaded Karski to address the 1981 International Liberators’ Conference, which Wiesel had organized. The following year, Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, recognized Karski as Righteous Among the Nations.

“The Lord assigned me a role to speak and write during the war, when—it seemed to me—it might help. It did not. ...”

My faith tells me the second Original Sin has been committed by humanity: through commission, or omission, or self-imposed ignorance, or insensitivity, or self-interest, or hypocrisy, or heartless rationalization. This sin will haunt humanity to the end of time. It does haunt me. And I want it to be so.”

‘It Was Some Hell’

Jan Karski’s character and early training made him uniquely suited for his mission to the world. He was born Jan Koziński in 1914 in the industrial city of Lodz, Poland; the surname Karski was one of several underground aliases. From his mother, Walentyna, he inherited his deep Catholic faith. At a time when anti-Semitism was common and accepted in the West, she preached tolerance.

An excellent student, Karski earned a diplomatic appointment after finishing university studies and mandatory military service with a Polish cavalry unit. He traveled throughout Europe and gained fluency in a number of languages, including English, aided by a near photographic memory.

On Sept. 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west; the Soviet Union invaded from the east shortly afterward. Called up for action, Karski’s unit was captured by the Soviets, but he managed to escape—avoiding the fate of thousands of his fellow Polish military officers killed in the 1940 Katyn massacre.

As he recounted in his 1944 book about his wartime experiences, *Story of a Secret State*, Karski joined the fledgling Polish underground, which would later develop into the most sophisticated resistance movement in Europe. He began work as a courier, bringing information to the Polish government-in-exile to the West. On his second mission, he was betrayed to the Gestapo while in Slovakia, interrogated and beaten savagely. Afraid he would give away the underground’s secrets, he attempted suicide by slitting his wrists with a razor blade hidden in his shoe. While he recuperated in the hospital, a group of resistance fighters—many later executed—arranged for his escape. He soon returned to work as a courier.

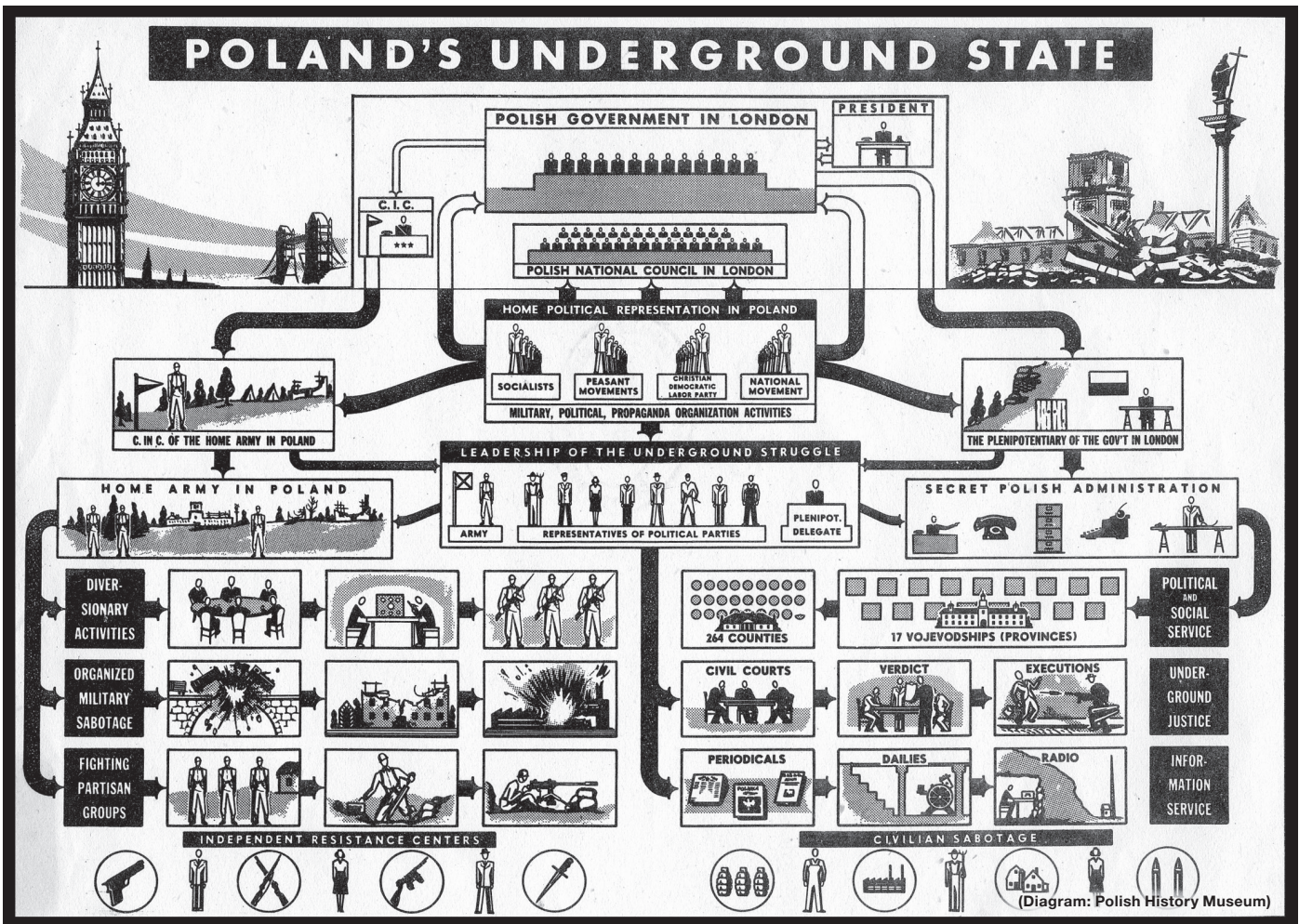
By mid-1942, the Nazis had begun to put in place the grotesque mechanisms of the Final Solution. Hearing that Karski was preparing to travel to London, two Jewish leaders in hiding approached him, beseeching him to bring word of the extermination of the Jewish population to the Allies. They smuggled him into the Warsaw Ghetto in the middle of mass Nazi deportations.

The Lord assigned me a role to speak and write during the war, when—it seemed to me—it might help. It did not.

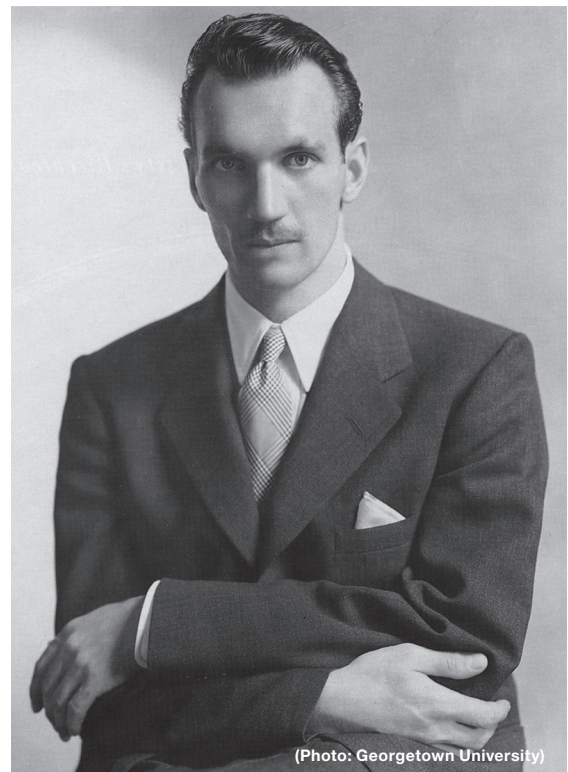
“So suddenly, again I am known,” Karski told *Georgetown Magazine* in 1988. “Eventually, I hope they will forget me.”

The world did not forget.

Speaking at the 1981 liberators’ conference, Karski said:



(Photo: Museum of the City of Lodz, courtesy of the Jan Kozielski family)



(Photo: Georgetown University)

Clockwise, from top: The Polish Underground State, depicted in a 1942 diagram, marshaled resistance against the Nazis. In his 20s, Jan Karski, a diplomat-turned-courier for the underground state, was bringing eyewitness accounts of the mass destruction of the Jews to the West. A lifelong Roman Catholic, Karski, second from right, born Jan Kozielski, lived among Jewish families in Lodz. His mother, right, preached religious tolerance.

Mr. Karski, a man like me talking to a man like you must totally be frank. I am unable to believe what you told me.

“It wasn’t humanity, it was some hell,” Karski testified to Lanzmann. He told of seeing naked corpses dumped in the streets; women with shriveled breasts attempting to feed their infants. He continued:

“At a certain point, some movement starts. There were two boys, nice-looking boys. Hitler-Jugend [Youth] uniforms. They walked, every step they made, Jews disappearing. At a certain point, one boy gets to his pocket, without even thinking, shoots, the other boy congratulating him. I was paralyzed. Then a Jewish woman, probably she recognized that I’m not a Jew, says, ‘Go, go, it doesn’t do you any good.’ Then we left the ghetto.”

Karski then infiltrated a Nazi sorting station at Izbica Lubelska for Jews en route to Belzec. Disguised as a Ukrainian militiaman, he witnessed men, women and children jammed into cattle cars spread with quicklime.

He heard their cries of agony as the caustic alkaline burned their flesh. Momentarily breaking down, Karski nearly gave himself away.

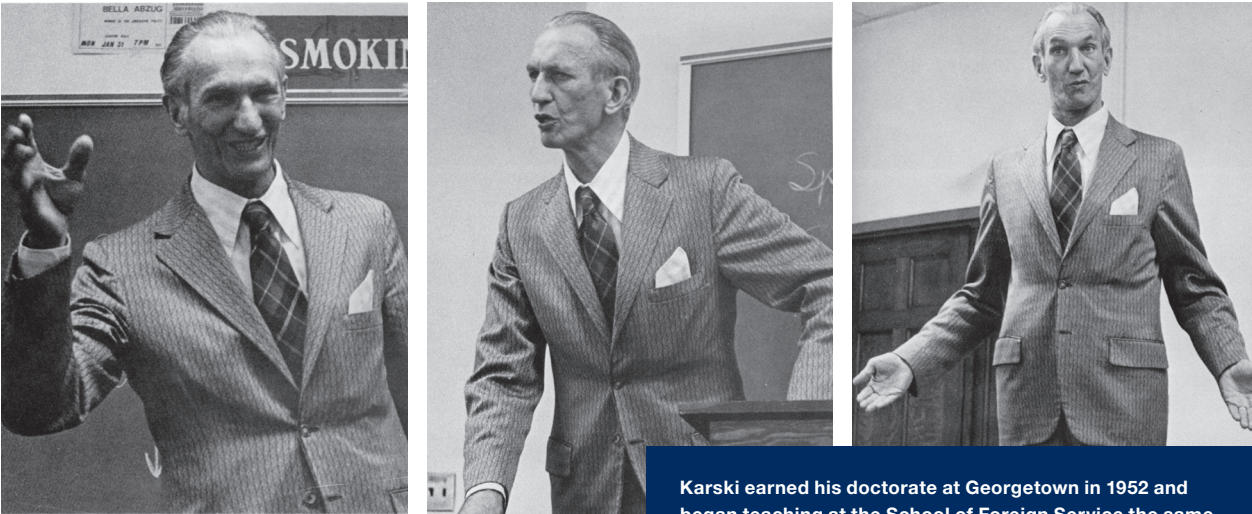
In London and later in Washington, Karski briefed top-level government officials on what he had seen, including a secret meeting with Roosevelt. The Polish ambassador to Washington arranged for Karski to meet Felix Frankfurter, an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, who was Jewish. Karski later recounted Frankfurter’s response: “Mr. Karski, a man like me talking to a man like you must totally be frank. I am unable to believe what you told me.”

His identity now known, Karski settled temporarily in the United States, publishing the best-selling *Story of a Secret State* and lecturing throughout the country on behalf of the Polish government-in-exile. At the war’s end, a Soviet-backed government was installed in Poland with the West’s complicity—cementing Karski’s lifelong, fervid antipathy to communism. He reacted with disgust when Allied leaders expressed surprise at the full extent of the Holocaust.

He was a man without a country, without a vocation and without faith. “I turned my back on humanity,” he later said.



Wehrmacht soldiers, the German armed forces, transport Jewish men from the Warsaw Ghetto to concentration camps in 1941. (Photo: Galerie Bilderwelt/Getty Images)



Karski earned his doctorate at Georgetown in 1952 and began teaching at the School of Foreign Service the same year. He retired in 1986. (Photos: Georgetown University)

‘A True Compass’

At Georgetown University, Karski found rescue. He had been befriended by Edmund Walsh, S.J., rector and founder of the School of Foreign Service, when he first visited Washington during the war. In 1949, Walsh offered him a fellowship to pursue his doctorate at Georgetown. The day Karski received his degree in 1952, he came home to find an offer of employment from Walsh as a faculty member in SFS. “There commenced a 40-year Karski-Georgetown honeymoon,” said Peter Krogh, SFS dean from 1970 to 1995.

Karski the diplomat, soldier and spy became Karski the teacher. He became a hero in that role as well.

“He was by far the best and most memorable professor I had at Georgetown,” said Mull. “The first day of class he strode in with this incredible physical presence, still bearing the smell of cigarette smoke—he was quite a heavy smoker—and in a thick Polish accent, he began teaching the class.”

“He basically assumed the persona of a communist, and I was absolutely convinced he *was* a communist,” Mull said. “He had the whole class enthralled. He had a way of bringing the material—and it could be very dry, difficult material—to life in a way that no professor I’d ever had came close to doing.”

“Any time that students went into one of his lectures, it was an intellectual experience,” said faculty colleague Karl Cerny, adding that Karski always lectured without notes. “He didn’t care very much about academic disciplines—he could alternately be a historian, a philosopher, a political scientist. Not

surprisingly, he was often voted the No. 1 teacher at SFS.

“He was also something of a ham,” Cerny added.

In fact, Cerny noted, despite the tragic circumstances of his life, Karski retained his sense of humor. “He would laugh at his own jokes, and when he laughed, it was a belly laugh; it came from the gut on up.” Like a real-life James Bond, he also enjoyed a good martini. “I never tried to match him,” Cerny said. “He must have had one empty leg.”

“For thousands of students at Georgetown, for four decades, Karski was Eastern Europe; Eastern Europe was Karski,” said Robert Billingsley (F’68), who has been a driving force in the campaign to honor Karski internationally. “Unless you’d seen a black-and-white movie about World War II, you just hadn’t seen that many people like him. The first day of class, he had on this elegant tan suit with a white shirt and a black tie, and not a hair out of place. And when he came in, you said, this guy, he should be in a bar in a hotel in Warsaw waiting for a date with Ingrid Bergman.”

Karski also left behind a great legacy in his academic service and scholarship. In addition to writing his magnum opus, *The Great Powers and Poland: 1919–1945*, published in 1985, he gave hundreds of lectures over the years to governmental agencies—including the Foreign Service Institute at the State Department and the CIA—as well as to military personnel. He went on two extensive international lecture tours for the U.S. government to speak on the benefits of capitalism and democratic rule.

Krogh has long praised Karski for his central role in the elevation of the School of Foreign Service in the 1970s and 1980s. “His gravitas, dignity, integrity, humanity and wisdom provided both a secure foundation and a true compass for the school,” Krogh said in a recent speech. “He was, in many ways, our North Star and our Southern Cross.”

‘Where Was Man?’

Once Karski began to speak again of his role in World War II, he gave generously of his time to the Georgetown community as a guest lecturer in classrooms and in public forums.

Rabbi Harold White, who retired in 2010 as Georgetown’s senior Jewish chaplain, worked with Karski to develop the course Theological Implications of the Holocaust, still being taught today.

“Karski’s point of view was that the Holocaust asked not where was God, but where was man,” White said. “He said that the greatest sin of all is the sin of silence. If you’re silent, it’s as if you’ve committed the act.”

“When the university hired me to photograph Dr. Karski in the 1980s, he was probably the most reluctant person I have ever photographed,” said Carol Harrison (F’73), who first met Karski as a teenager while her mother was working at SFS. “However, when I later visited him in his home, and asked if I might photograph him with my daughter, Olivia, he was very enthused. He treated Olivia as a kindly older uncle.” Harrison has recently published a book in tribute to Karski, *Jan Karski Photographs*.

As Karski once again became known to the world, he spoke around the globe—although he remained uncomfortable with public accolades. He received long overdue international acclaim, including honorary citizenship in Israel and Poland’s highest civilian honor, the Order of the White Eagle. Individuals whose lives he had touched were able to give him proper thanks.

“I got to see him when he came back to Poland in the 1990s—his health was already severely deteriorating,” said Mull. “It was great that I had the opportunity to thank him for being a terrific professor and to pay tribute to the heroic things that he did during World War II.”

Karski himself recalled another such meeting in 1995 with one of his guides

from the Warsaw Ghetto, a man then known only as Dudek. “I went on a lecture tour to Australia, to Melbourne. This man came, his name is David Landau. He said, ‘I saw you entering the ghetto.’ He survived. And now he’s one of the richer men in Australia. I love it,” Karski said with a laugh.

Five years later, Jan Karski, 85, was in the midst of a chess game when he suffered a stroke. He died that same day, July 13, 2000. He was mourned around the world—nowhere more profoundly than at Georgetown. In his homily at the memorial service, then-President Leo J. O’Donovan, S.J. (C’56), remembered Karski as a “just man in whose heart the Spirit of God dwelt.”

On May 29, 2012, President Obama awarded Karski a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom.

As part of the commemoration leading up to the 2014 centennial of Karski’s birth, Georgetown University Press recently published a new edition of *Story of a Secret State* with a foreword by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, now a Georgetown professor, an afterword by former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and a biographical essay by Snyder, the Yale historian.

Towards the end of Karski’s life, the USC Shoah Foundation filmed him as part of its comprehensive effort to gather testimony from Holocaust survivors and witnesses. He offered a valediction:

“God gave us a soul, and we have infinite capacity to do good. And each of us has infinite capacity to do evil. And we have a choice. God left us free will. Everything is possible as a result.”

An Ageless Message

In 2008, Georgetown dedicated a statue of Karski on Copley Lawn, a gift from the American Center of Polish Culture. He is seated on a bench, his arm resting on a cane as he contemplates his next move in a game of chess. The accompanying plaque reads in part: “A noble man walked amongst us and made us better by his presence.”

God gave us a soul, and we have infinite capacity to do good. And each of us has infinite capacity to do evil. And we have a choice. God left us free will. Everything is possible as a result.



On Copley Lawn, a statue of Karski, engaged in a favorite pastime of chess, reads: “A noble man walked amongst us and made us better by his presence.”

Kurdish émigré Loghman Fattahi (ف'١١) discovered the statue as a freshman when he was seeking out a quiet place on campus. He noticed that several of the chess pieces were missing and started a personal campaign to repair the statue. In doing so, he learned everything he could about Karski.

“The way I connected to Georgetown was the story of Dr. Karski,” Fattahi said. “I was very much humbled by his compassion, his service, his humility.”

Fattahi and his family had come to the United States in 2000 as political refugees after escaping to Turkey from Iran. Fattahi’s father had been imprisoned by the Iranian government for advocating on behalf of Kurdish human rights. Like Karski, he was tortured in captivity—beaten with clubs, shocked with electrical wires, his left foot pierced with a nail.

Through Karski’s example, Fattahi said, he learned that each of us has a choice in how we act. “In the years to come,

I will carry with me Jan Karski’s spirit of compassion—Georgetown’s spirit of compassion—especially for those moments when, representing our nation abroad, I may face images of malice and suffering,” Fattahi said in his 2011 Senior Convocation speech.

This summer, after completing his master’s as a Pickering Fellow at Tufts’ Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Fattahi joined the U.S. Foreign Service, serving his adopted country as Karski once had. “I would love to go to Poland,” he said.

Although Loghman Fattahi never sat in Karski’s classroom, he is a student of Karski’s just the same. ✚

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Learn more about Jan Karski, watch videos and share your comments at magazine.georgetown.edu.

