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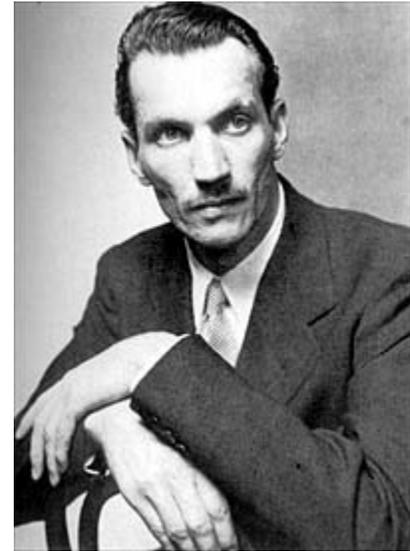
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The Unicorn and “The Karski Report”

Posted by *Richard Brody*

Dramas of historical politics, such as “The King’s Speech” and “Downfall,” which stage the behind-the-scenes stories of key moments in the life of nations and the work of leaders, are à la mode now; some of these movies (such as Robert Guédiguian’s “The Last Mitterrand”) are very good, but I’d pack them all away in a basket in exchange for Claude Lanzmann’s most recent film, “The Karski Report,” which (as I wrote earlier this week) was broadcast in France in March but still hasn’t been screened here. It’s one of three pendants to “Shoah” that Lanzmann has made (I’ve written about the other two, “Sobibor, Oct. 14, 1943, 4 P.M.” and “A Visitor from the Living”). I’ve seen “The Karski Report”; though it features no staged events—it’s almost entirely an interview with Jan Karski, an official in the Polish resistance—it conjures, in addition to the evocative wonder of Karski’s own presence, images of a pair of critical moments in diplomatic history (his 1944 meetings with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter to report on the situation in Poland) with an imaginative power incomparably superior to that of reënactments.



Karski figures in the concluding section of “Shoah,” in which he describes his visit to the Warsaw Ghetto and mentions that, when he went to London and the United States to speak with Allied politicians, he reported on what he saw there. But he doesn’t mention the officials he reported to, what he told them, and what their response was. In fact, Karski did—in a second day of interviews—discuss these matters with Lanzmann, and “The Karski Report” is made almost entirely of footage of the interviews on these subjects.

The descriptions that, thirty-four years after the meetings, Karski summons are of a novelistic level of precision and insight that are, in themselves, literary acts of the first order. The decisive moment that he describes with an astonishment that still arouses his deepest and most troubled emotions concerns his narration, to Frankfurter (who, as Karski knew, was Jewish), about the Warsaw Ghetto and the extermination camp Belzec. Frankfurter’s response, Karski said, was, “I do not believe you.” When the Polish ambassador, who was present at the meeting, vouched for Karski’s irreproachable honesty, Frankfurter responded, “I did not say that he is lying; I said that I don’t believe him.”

After describing his own shattered inward reaction to Frankfurter’s declaration, Karski makes a philosophical point of an extraordinary profundity. He explains that he considers the Holocaust both a unique and an unprecedented historical phenomenon, and one that, precisely for that reason, defies comprehension. It’s worth adding that it may well have been even harder for learned minds to accept. It was, in effect, the event that defied the laws of nature: it was the perpetual-motion machine, it was the first unicorn.

Lanzmann makes this point in his spoken prologue to the film (which is transcribed there as a title crawl); it concludes with this remark:

What is knowledge? What can information about a horror, a literally unheard-of one, mean to the human brain, which is unprepared to receive it because it concerns a crime that is without precedent in the history of humanity? Whatever one may say, once Hitler's war against the Jews had begun, the majority of Jews could not have been saved. That is the tragic side of history, which forbids retrospective illusions that overlook the depth, the weight, of the illegibility of an epoch, the true configuration of the impossible. Raymond Aron, who had fled to London, was asked whether he knew what was happening at that time in the East. He answered: I knew, but I didn't believe it, and because I didn't believe it, I didn't know.

“The Karski Report” should be shown here, widely, and soon.

P.S. Lanzmann was prompted to make this film by the publication of a French novel, “Jan Karski,” by Yannick Haenel, in 2009 (I haven't read it). Writing in the magazine *Marianne* in January of this year, Lanzmann attacked the book as “a falsification of History and of its protagonists” and, a week later, in *Le Monde*, announced that he had completed “The Karski Report,” “with the intention of re-establishing the truth as quickly as possible.” Haenel, for his part, claimed (in *L'Express*) that he was motivated to write his novel precisely to reveal details of Karski's story—in particular, the trip to Washington, D.C.—that Lanzmann omitted from “Shoah” and that are the subject of the new film.

Keywords

- Claude Lanzmann;
- Jan Karski;
- Shoah;
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