

'I saw terrible things'; Polish underground hero downplays courageous role

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Photo: Jan Karski & Irene Tomaszewski

Jan Karski, the Polish underground hero who brought news of the Holocaust to the West in 1942, downplayed his courage in a speech yesterday in Montreal.

He said he was simply obeying his superiors when he sneaked into the Warsaw ghetto and a holding camp for Jews, then risked capture and death to smuggle microfilmed evidence, backed by what he had seen, to the Allies.

"I saw terrible things that none of you could imagine," he told a hushed, overflow audience of Montreal university students at the Polish consulate.

Karski, now 81, described how he took a circuitous route through Vichy France and Spain to Gibraltar and finally London. There, and later in Washington, D.C., he conveyed the desperate appeal of Europe's Jews for blank passports, massive drops of leaflets over Germany urging an end to their persecution, even bombing raids on the railway approaches to the camps - anything that might have alleviated their suffering.

History records that his attempt was largely futile.

"The issue was not anti-Semitism," he said. "The issue was that all those problems remained secondary to the goal of Germany's utter destruction. Probably the Allied leaders were embarrassed."

Karski was a Polish army officer before the Nazis overran his country in 1939. A Roman Catholic, he has been honored by Israel as one of the "righteous among nations."

His dignified, sombre account yesterday was relieved by several moments of humor, however black. For example, he described how the Gestapo captured him while he was on a mission as a courier for the Polish underground.

"They treated me very badly. They broke my jaw, my ribs, my teeth. I can no longer hear from my right ear. "I decided to commit suicide with a Gillette I had hidden on me. I slashed my wrists."

He survived and was rescued in a daring raid by the underground. Later, in London, a doctor asked why his wrists were scarred, and Karski explained. "You Poles are crazy," the doctor exclaimed. "Don't you know you can't do your wrists with razor? You need a proper knife."

The students joined in Karski's laughter as he then aped his own destruction, hacking in mock desperation at his tortured flesh.

Though Karski's listeners remained riveted throughout his speech, an echo of the frustrations he must have felt 53 years ago occasionally broke through.

"Now, postwar, you won't understand," he said. "I'm not sure you young people are interested any more."