

JAN KARSKI

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Jan Karski was born Jan Koziielewski in 1914 in Lodz, Poland (under Russian control until 1918), to Walentina and Stefan Koziielewski. He had six brothers:

Boguslaw, Cyjrian, Edmund, Marian, Stefan, and Uzef, and one sister: Laura. His father worked in a small leather goods factory. His mother was a devout Catholic and Jan was raised to be respectful of other religions. Jan went to public school and studied abroad during the summers in Romania, France, Switzerland, Germany, and England. These experiences allowed him to become familiar with a variety of languages and cultures. He later went to the University of Warsaw and studied law. He graduated in 1935 and enlisted in the Polish Army as a member of the Fifth Horse Artillery Division.

On September 1, 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, Jan was stationed at Auschwitz I, which at the time was a Polish army artillery barracks. The Germans bombed the camp and Jan and his division fled east. They were captured by Soviet soldiers and held in a Soviet camp for a month. One day, it was announced that non-commissioned officers of German descent could go and fight for the Germans. Jan, who was an officer, traded a uniform with another soldier to participate in this exchange. He later escaped German control and found refuge with a Polish family who gave him food and clothes. Jan then went to Warsaw and joined an underground resistance group called the Union of the Armed Struggle. Jan's knowledge of other languages, especially French and English, made him a valuable courier.

Between the winter of 1939 and the fall of 1942, Jan worked as a courier carrying messages between Allied nations and the underground. In the fall of 1942,

he was smuggled into the Warsaw ghetto so that he could write reports on the living conditions there. Jan remembered seeing horrific images of death, starvation, and humiliation. He then took his reports, along with messages from the underground, and pleas for aid from Jews in the ghetto, to high-ranking Allied officials in England and the United States.

Jan was eventually given an audience with President Franklin Roosevelt as part of his underground diplomatic work. The President told him to take back the message that the Allies would win the war and the guilty would be punished. The President also told Jan to assure his nation that they had a friend in the White House and that freedom and justice would prevail. Although Jan wanted to bring more than rhetoric back with him, he felt too intimidated by the President's power and presence to ask for it. However, because Jan's identity had become known, he was forced to remain in the United States and not return to Poland.

After the war ended, Jan became a professor at Georgetown University. He was married in 1965 to a dancer and choreographer, Pola Nirenska. She died in 1992. At the time of Jan's interview in 1995, he was living in Maryland.