The Karski Report
A Voice with the Ring of Truth

Rémy Besson
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'I took this decision because it seemed to me absolutely necessary to establish the truth.'
Claude Lanzmann, introduction to his film The Karski Report, 2010

1 In 1977, while making the film Shoah, Claude Lanzmann and his team met Jan Karski, a member of the Polish Resistance. Late in 1978, breaking a silence that had lasted more than thirty years, Karski agreed to two days of filming in his home. The interview focused on his activities as a liaison agent between the Polish Home Army – Armia Krajowa – and the Polish government in exile: Karski talked about his meeting with two Jewish leaders, whom he accompanied, at their request, into the Warsaw Ghetto, then into a camp he believed to be Belzec. Then, he described how he had transmitted the information in his possession to the Allied leaders, and notably, on July 28, 1943, to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1985 Claude Lanzmann devoted thirty-nine minutes – out of Shoah’s more than nine-hour running time – to this testimony. In this carefully orchestrated film, which interweaves the voices of persecuted Jews, their German persecutors, and Polish witnesses, Karski is the sole Polish Catholic to speak at length of Polish aid to the Jews. In 2010 Lanzmann used the original interview to make another fifty-two-minute film, The Karski Report, which was broadcast on the Franco-German channel Arte on March 17 of that year.

2 Between January and April 2010, a dispute arose between the film’s director and Yannick Haenel, the author of the novel Jan Karski. For Lanzmann the subject of the book was less problematic than its three-part structure and overall point of view. In the first part, the novelist appropriates Karski’s account in Shoah of his role as a courier for the Polish resistance. In the second part, he uses Karski’s autobiography, published during World War II, as the thread of his narrative. And in the third part he attributes his own ideas to Karski. The crux of the controversy was Haenel’s fictionalized version of Karski’s verbal report to Roosevelt: Lanzmann found the author’s style flippant and challenged his
attribution to Roosevelt of responsibility in the destruction of the Jews of Europe. The book as a whole and this section in particular seemed to him anachronistic and insufficiently respectful of historical fact and the persons involved. The issue, then, was two conflicting visions of Karski’s testimony. For Lanzmann only the account given by the witness in 1978 could be taken as trustworthy; Haenel, on the other hand, stressed the freedom of interpretation inherent in writing a work of fiction. This was, therefore, a fairly classic argument about the functions of documentary and fiction and their relationship to the truth.

Jan Karski in Shoah

When speaking of Shoah, Claude Lanzmann and his team prefer to use the term ‘fiction of reality’ rather than ‘documentary.’ Lanzmann has always insisted that the truth of the film lies more in its overall architecture than in any particular witness’s testimony. In the July-August 1985 issue of Les Cahiers du cinéma he says:

‘There were requirements in terms of content – important things I wanted to say – and requirements in terms of form and architecture that dictated the film’s length ... There are magnificent things [that were not included]. It tore my heart out not to keep them, but at the same time not all that much: the film took shape as I was making it, and that shape defined by default everything that would follow. Even if they were very important things, it wasn’t too painful to leave them out because it was the overall architecture that governed everything.’

The interview with Jan Karski was edited late in 1984. The sequence used in the film bears on two subjects addressed on the first day: Karski’s meeting with Polish Jewish leaders and his ‘tour’ of the Warsaw Ghetto. This sequence permits the introduction of the ghetto theme, as well as the idea that the Jews resisted the Final Solution. It also allows a transition between images of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, where any attempt at an uprising was futile – Rudolf Vrba’s narrative – and of the Warsaw Ghetto, the site that symbolizes the insurrection by the Polish Jews with which the film closes. Shoah’s editor Ziva Postec explains:

‘For us, the reason for this choice was to show that the extermination of the Jews took place at the same time in the camps and in the ghettos, contrary to what most people think (which is that the ghettos came before the camps).’

So Karski’s story forms part of a whole and reinforces the overall architecture of Shoah. An agreement reached with Karski in 1978 meant that he could not give other filmed interviews before the film’s release, but after some years – in 1982 – he was growing impatient. At the time, Lanzmann wrote him a letter whose content is revealed in his recent book, Patagonian Hare:

‘Dear Karski, I wrote, five hours of film are ready, which means more than half. Everybody agrees that they are very good, and you haven’t appeared yet. Calculating as honestly as I can at the moment, my plan is that you won’t appear for another two hours, thirty-seven minutes and twenty-two seconds ... I should add that your part will be long and of decisive importance both for the film and for history ... I realise that the film needs all its protagonists, but at the same time it can do without any particular one of them. This is, no doubt, the mark of great works.’
Although the original of this letter – now in the archives of Karski’s American biographer E. Thomas Wood – is significantly different from Lanzmann’s recollection of it, the underlying message is the same: Shoah could have been made without Karski’s participation. In 1982, as in 2010, Lanzmann considered this freedom to choose his witnesses essential.11

Shoah: A Fiction of Reality

In Shoah, Jan Karski’s narrative is intercut with alternating shots of his spoken testimony and of the places where Europe’s Jews were exterminated, as well as of images of America. During the first few minutes the camera moves from Karski’s face to a view of the Statue of Liberty seen through a window. A close analysis of this section and of the context of the making of the film reveals two separate takes, shot in different places.

Lanzmann filmed Karski in Washington, not in New York, and the impression of visual continuity between the interview and the exteriors is achieved by the editing. The shot following the presentation of Karski in his living room is a view of the southern tip of Manhattan, filmed from Brooklyn Heights; then, a few seconds later, there is a reverse zoom of an American flag on the facade of the White House, which was filmed from Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. So the location shown is not that of the interview, but the one Karski is talking about. Specifically, this is a metonymic representation of America via its symbols. Lasting less than a minute, this series of images – the Statue of Liberty, New York skyscrapers, the American flag and the White House – indicates a desire to portray the United States as a democratic country wielding real economic and political power. The film’s composition, then, is based on a structured interplay between sound and images, with the latter never corresponding exactly to what is being said by the speakers.

Karski’s first words indicate the same kind of editing technique. In the first shot Karski says, ‘Now … Now I go back … thirty-five years … No, I don’t go back … You know as a matter of fact … no …’ Then he continues in the second shot: ‘I’m ready … In the middle of 1942, I was thinking to continue my service as a courier, between the Polish underground and the Polish government in exile, in London. The Jewish leaders in Warsaw learned about it. A meeting was arranged, outside of the ghetto. There were two gentlemen. They did not live in the ghetto. They introduced themselves – leader of Bund. Zionist leader’. Finally, in the third shot, he asks himself, ‘Now, what transpired?’14.

In the first and third shots sound and image are synchronized. The second, however, is edited, using a long shot of the living room where the interview is taking place. First the corridor shot is silent, and then Karski’s voice is heard again, leading the viewer to think that after coming down the corridor, he has taken up where he left off. In fact this is an intercut and the soundtrack is made up of different excerpts from the 1978 recording. Working from the transcript of the original interview, now in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the presence of ten fragments – from pages 1, 7, 8, and 9 – has been identified within this passage alone. Nor has the chronological order of those fragments been observed:

‘(1) I’m ready… // (2) In the middle of 1942, I was thinking to continue my service as a courier // (3) between the Polish underground and the Polish government in exile, // (4) in London. // (5) The Jewish leaders in Warsaw learned about it. // (6) A meeting was arranged, // (7) outside of the ghetto. // (8) There were two
The third segment of this passage – ‘between the Polish underground and the Polish Government in exile’ – is composed of three distinct parts. The cutting process can be seen on the first page of the transcript made by the film team. During the editing Ziva Postec regularly underlined words she wanted included in the film, in this case ‘between,’ ‘the Polish underground,’ and ‘and the Polish government in exile.’ This led to the deleting of two passages: ‘the leadership of various segments of’ and ‘and then a courier between political parties, from time to time the home army, delegate of the Government.’

Postec has recounted how she worked on the images and words of the filmed interviews: ‘I had to become a lace-maker meaning that I reconstructed what people took a very long time to say. I shortened and reassembled the sentences … As I was saying, you have to manipulate to tell the truth, and that was my concern … It’s a way of connecting the image and the sound. Of putting the sound alongside the image.’ As Lanzmann himself has explained, Shoah is not direct access to testimony, but a complex visual narrative.

The Karski Report: The Unadorned Truth?

Broadcast in 2010, The Karski Report focuses primarily on the meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Jan Karski in 1943, and on the transmission of information about the destruction of the Jews of Europe during World War II. On July 7, 1978, the director had outlined to Karski the way he wanted the filming to proceed:

‘Point 6. I would like to have with you in front of the camera a kind of philosophical discussion about the problem of transmission of experience: in which respect did the people believe your report? Could Belzec or Treblinka have the signification they should have had for people living peacefully in Washington or New York? I remember vividly for instance, how deep and impressive you were when you related to me your meeting with Frankfurter.’

In The Karski Report, Lanzmann claims to establish the truth by presenting passages from the interview that were not included in Shoah. He explains that the courier’s testimony is seen and heard just as it was recorded in 1978, and the film is represented as taking on a form close to that of oral-history interviews with Holocaust survivors. While in Shoah the truth emerged through the construction of an edited, complex cinematic work, the director insists that in The Karski Report the truth comes directly from the mouth of the witness.

Thus the filmed interview with Jan Karski is made to seem the only valid means of refuting Yannick Haenel’s ‘false testimony.’ Introducing the repeat broadcast of Shoah on Arte TV on January 20, 2010, Lanzmann said:

‘One final word. A book by Yannick Haenel, which purports to be a novel, has recently been devoted to Jan Karski, the major protagonist of the second part of Shoah. In fact, in 1978 I had already filmed with Karski everything this ‘novel’ invents. This material will be the basis of a new film titled The Karski Report, to be broadcast in March on this channel. In it the real Jan Karski personally re-establishes the truth.’

Where for the novelist the handing-on of history requires literary intervention, for the director historical truth emerges from the words of the witness. At the same time Lanzmann said in the introduction to the January–March 2010 number of Les Temps Modernes, which also reprinted the spoken elements of the new film in their entirety, ‘I
filmed all this [in 1978]: what you are about to read after this introduction is the transcription of my questions and Karski’s answers.20 And in the lead-in to the film itself he explains again that what Karski says must necessarily establish the truth about him:

‘Forty years later, in 1985, the release of my film Shoah brought Karski back to life for all of us, giving him a place in history and in the human psyche ... During the second day of filming Karski laid bare for my camera all the details of his meeting with President Roosevelt. For artistic reasons to do with dramatic tension, at the point where I was in the shaping of my film – because it would have been too long, and because Karski himself, on the second day, seemed very different from the way he had been on the first – I opted to put these passages aside. Nonetheless you are now going to see part of them – in particular the meeting between Karski and Roosevelt – in a moment. I made this decision because it seemed to me absolutely necessary to re-establish the truth.’

If the same 1978 interview is used for both Shoah and The Karski Report, in 1985 and in 2010, then Lanzmann has altered his point of view about the director’s task. Over the same period he has also changed his mode of visual editing. The Karski Report seems to follow the unfolding of the original interview and in doing so supports the authenticity of what is said. Moreover, in contrast with Shoah, no shot external to the location of the interview has been introduced by editing, accentuating the impression of unity of time and space.

Nonetheless, in order to reinforce this feeling of authenticity, the nine shots making up The Karski Report have undergone an editing process every bit as elaborate as that of Shoah. The first shot reuses Karski’s words from Shoah, ‘But I report what I saw ...’ The second consists of a written text whose words, scrolling on the screen, are read aloud by the director to explain the film and guide the viewer’s interpretation of the interview to come. The conversation between the director and the Polish Resistance courier begins with the third shot – but is its content identical to the filmed material of 1978?

The transcript of the dialogue and the sound and image tracks of the original interview in the Holocaust Memorial Museum, offer an answer to this question. Although the recording of the interview is now available in digital form, with sound/image synchronization, the two tracks were in fact recorded separately in 1978, the sound with a Nagra tape recorder and the image with a 16 mm camera. In 1961, in an article on method for historians, Georges Sadoul wrote, ‘Editing is used for the images, but also for the soundtrack, whose words, music and miscellaneous noise are most often recorded separately before being merged in an operation called mixing. There is a relationship between sound and image editing, but the two are not directly connected.’ A comparison of Karski’s words as spoken, recorded, and preserved in the archives with the version presented in The Karski Report reveals obvious differences that challenge the director’s assertions and the impression of realness produced by the editing.

First, the entire interview has not been included, and the section relating to Karski’s visit to the extermination camp at Belzec has not yet been shown. As well, as in Shoah, the chronological order of the 1978 interview has not been maintained. The segments making up the film come from reels 23 to 30, with the second-last shot taken from the very end of reel 30, the last reel used.

In addition, two short passages have been cut between shots 3 and 4, then between shots 5 and 6. The deleted sections modify some of the ideas put forward by Lanzmann during the controversy; for example, the sincerity of the interlocutors in the United States.
Other, longer passages have also been cut, between shots 6 and 7, and 7 and 8, when Karski talks about meetings that took place with Lord Selborne, Anthony Eden, Cordell Hall, Cardinal Amleto Giovanni Gicognani, Archbishop Edward Mooney, Archbishop Samuel Alphonsus Stritch, Archbishop Francis Joseph Spellman, Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise, Dr Nahum Goldman, and Richard Law. With the exception of Rabbi Wise and Dr Goldman, Karski described the limited interest shown by these people in the Jewish aspect of his report. Of Law, he concluded, ‘I think that he was more disinterested than others, in this particular part of my mission, but I do not remember particular points.’ These passages, deleted during the editing of the soundtrack, also modify the ideas expressed by Lanzmann.

Finally, two words spoken by Lanzmann have been changed in a way that alters the original soundtrack. In the excerpt from the original transcript and the ‘text of the film’ published in Les Temps Modernes, two sentences differ from those in The Karski Report. In 1978, Lanzmann – whose face, but not lips, can be seen on the left-hand edge of the screen, asked: ‘Did you remember Belzec ...?’. In the 2010 film the question has become, ‘Did you remember Warsaw?’ The second instance of words being changed also relates to the extermination camp at Belzec: the question put by Lanzmann – not on-screen at the time – in 1978, ‘Is it possible to grasp Belzec?’ becomes, after editing for The Karski Report, ‘Is it possible to grasp the destruction of the Jews ...?’. Very probably, Lanzmann did not want The Karski Report to reveal that during their meeting he believed Karski had visited the Belzec extermination camp.

While the format of The Karski Report is different from that of the segment in Shoah, the editing does show similarities: some parts of the original interview are not included, certain passages have been cut from the edited excerpts, and some words have been changed. Whatever the type of documentary and whatever the artistic choices made by the director, Shoah and The Karski Report share generally accepted editing practices.

From Filmed Testimony to Publication

The shaping of testimony in order to ensure its transmission is hardly specific to the cinema or to Claude Lanzmann. Jan Karski’s first public statement about his missions during World War II was made on October 28, 1981, at the International Liberators Conference in Washington. Invited by Elie Wiesel, he shared the stand with John Pehle, Vassily Yakovlevich Petrenko, and Robert Wolfe. The CBS-TV news presenter Marvin Kalb acted as moderator for the ensuing discussion. The conference was filmed in its entirety and a transcript published in 1987. Here, too, Karski’s contribution was adapted to meet the demands of publication, notably with the addition of the following paragraph:

‘The subject “Discovering the Final Solution” requires consideration of the following questions: 1. What and when did the western leaders as well as western public opinion learn about the Jewish tragedy? 2. In what way did the information reach them? 3. What was the reaction? According to evidence?’

This addition, like the numerous other modifications of the text, does not change its meaning and observes the publishing conventions for the proceedings of an international colloquium. At the end of the question/answer segment the moderator asks Karski if he was surprised at the time by the reaction – or rather the lack of reaction – of
the people he spoke to. In the version published in 1987, Karski’s reply concludes as follows: ‘I was a tape recorder. If I had any human feeling – surprise, shock – I would have gone crazy a long time ago ... I had no feelings at all. So, don’t ask me was I surprised or not. I was not surprised about anything.’ The ellipsis points indicate a cut made by the editors and covering a relatively long period – 145 seconds – during which Karski, on the verge of weeping and breaking down, speaks of his meeting in London with Szmul Zygielbojm, one of the Bund leaders. The deletion of this passage for editorial reasons partially modifies the meaning of what Karski actually said. So these editorial choices demonstrate a different form of mediation of Karski’s words, as the filmed version of the conference shows. And whether in Lanzmann’s film or the proceedings of an international colloquium, Karski’s words have been remodeled to serve the intentions of the director or the publisher.

32 Neither Shoah, The Karski Report, or the publication of Karski’s first public speech provide direct access to the testimony of this historically significant figure. Nonetheless, his is a voice with the ring of truth, even though we do not have access to the original interview in its entirety. On the contrary, the words of this witness have been subjected to the forms of mediation characteristic of each medium, which are the outcome of specific choices made by the director, editor, or publisher in the interests of shaping a narrative from what we see, hear, and read. The print, sound, and visual archives made available by Claude Lanzmann at the Holocaust Memorial Museum permit a comparison of the technical aspects and stylistic choices he made in his two films based on the same interview with Jan Karski. If Shoah and The Karski Report reveal differences in their chosen form of mediation – the addition of exterior shots as opposed to a strict focus on the witness – both of Lanzmann’s films use the same modes of editing to ensure a clear reading of the films’ content. On the other hand, an analysis of Lanzmann’s comments on the films reveals significant changes between 1985 and 2010. When Shoah was released, he spoke of constructing a finely crafted narrative, composed of many voices, whose ‘overall architecture’ ensured access to the truth. Twenty-five years later, however, referring to The Karski Report, he asserted that it represented mediation pared down to its simplest form, so that ‘the real Jan Karski personally establishes the truth.’ Thus the concept of truth is historicized and distanced from an absolute.

33 The author wishes to thank Christian Delage, André Gunthert, and Thierry Gervais for their advice and Fanny Lautissier for her unfailing attentiveness.

NOTES

2. See also David Engel, ‘He had been chosen for this mission mainly because of his apolitical background, his impressive physical stamina and his photographic memory,’ in ‘The Western Allies and the Holocaust: Jan Karski’s Mission to the West, 1942–1944’, Holocaust and Genocide Studies 5, no. 4 (1990): 364.

3. In his oral reports during the war, in his memoirs, published in 1944 (Jan Karski, Story of a Secret State, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944) and in the statements to Lanzmann and, later, to Walter Laqueur (The Terrible Secret, New York: Henry Holt, 1998, p. 231), Karski says he visited the Belzec extermination camp. In Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe (New York: Harper, 1993), Raul Hilberg has shown that his testimony does not fit with Belzec (see also R. Hilberg, Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis, Lanham [Maryland]: Ivan R Dee, 2001). In 1990, David Engel postulated that Karski had not been to Belzec, but to the camp at Belzyce (‘The Western Allies and the Holocaust’ [note 2], 374). It may be, however, that Karski went to the Belzec secondary camp at Izbica Lubelska, see E. Thomas Wood and Stanislaw M. Jankowski, Karski: How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust (New York: Wiley, 1994), which draws on research by Polish historian Józef Marszalek. As Jean-Louis Panné points out, ‘When [Karski] was able to visit Poland in 1993, he visited both camps and formally identified Izbica, between Lublin and Belzec, not far from Zamosc: Jean-Louis PANNÉ, Jan Karski, le roman et l’histoire (Paris: Pascal Galodé, 2010), 20. In an interview filmed in 1995, Karski explained that he had certainly been to Izbica and not – as he had long believed – to Belzec: Diane Glazer Show (Los Angeles: Jewish Television Network, 1995), video consultable in the Jan Karski Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, box 31, file 11. In the Polish version of his memoirs, published in 1999, Karski has had Belzec replaced by Izbica, as Céline Gervais-Francelle points out in the preface to Jan Karski, mon témoignage devant le monde, Histoire d’un état clandestin [the French translation of Karski’s Story of a Secret State] (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010), xx and 389, note 4.

4. For a biography of Karski in English, see E. T. Wood and M. Jankowski, Karski (note 3) and in French, J-L PANNÉ, Jan Karski (note 3). In his book (p. 14) Panné speaks of having tried in vain to get Karski’s biography published in France. Regarding Karski’s missions, see D. Engel, ‘The Western Allies and the Holocaust’ (note 2). Karski’s papers and those of his biographers can be consulted in the Hoover Institution Archives.

5. For practical purposes let us consider that a chapter corresponds to the interview with a specific person (as on the DVD) and a sequence to a group of chapters on a specific subject: the ghettos, the gas chambers, reactions by Poles, etc.


7. At the beginning of his book Haenel says, ‘The scenes, sentences and thoughts attributed to Jan Karski are the product of invention’ (Y. Haenel, Jan Karski (note 6), 9. See also Y. Haenel, ‘Le recours à la fiction n’est pas seulement un droit, il est nécessaire’ [Recourse to fiction is not only a right, it is a necessity], Le Monde, January 25, 2010.


9. Ibid., 302.


11. Ibid.

‘You will find enclosed the photocopies of two letters which were written about my work by Raul Hilberg and Yehuda Bauer, the two greatest historians of the Holocaust, who saw the first three hours of my film last July in Paris. They don’t talk about your performance, because you start appearing in the film only after 5 hours 22 minutes. But maybe it is more important for you to appear in some North Carolina or Delaware TV programmes. The decision is yours.’ Letter dated November 10, 1982 (E. Thomas Wood Archives, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, box 12). Raul Hilberg and Yehuda Bauer are the two historical advisers mentioned in the film’s credits.


15. Ibid.


20. This quotation is taken from C. LANZMANN, ‘Jan Karski de Yannick Haenel: un faux roman’ (note 1), which Lanzmann presents as a republication of ‘my condemnation of his book, Jan Karski: a novel’ (ibid., 1). However, this introduction to the text of the film differs from the original, which simply says, ‘I filmed all this, and it will be broadcast on television in March, on Arte.’ A similar mention is just as logically cut from the end of the article: ‘... who will himself establish the truth in a film titled The Karski Report, which will be broadcast on Arte next March and of which the full text can be found in no. 657 of the review Les Temps Modernes.’ It should also be noted that on pages 3 and 5 Lanzmann changes the date of the Karski interview from 1978 to 1979 and that on page 4 he has cut the following passage: ‘...my silence allowed many of Haenel’s readers to believe that I had given the book my blessing.’


23. ‘Even at that time I had suspicions, having met some of those leaders – and whomever I met, I speak only about Government leaders, they were the most important people in the United States and in Great Britain – sometimes I could not avoid the suspicion that altogether they saw [written show] me as a matter of courtesy.’ Beginning of reel 24, page 53 of the transcript.

24. ‘Perhaps it was an act of courtesy towards the Polish Ambassador: I am doing something within your man’s mission [written: I don’t know].’ End of reel 25, page 59 of the transcript.

25. See the transcript for shots 6 and 7 (pp. 62–67) and between shots 7 and 8, from which the words on pages 68 and 69 have been excised.

26. The original transcript’s spelling of the names cited by Jan Karski has been corrected.

27. Then president of the World Jewish Congress (WJC).

28. Then president of the American Jewish Congress (AJC).

30. See the original transcript of Jan Karski’s interview with Claude Lanzmann, in the Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection (Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC), 68, online: http://resources.ushmm.org/film/display/detail.php?file_num=4739.

31. The transcript of The Karski Report runs as follows, except that in the original the words in italics were ‘Belzec’: ‘Yourself, for instance; when you were reporting every day, like a machine, as you say, did you remember Warsaw when you were in Washington?; and ‘How do you judge the people who did not grasp the real meaning of what it was? Is it possible to grasp the destruction of the Jews when one lives in Washington, a completely other world?’ See the original transcript of Jan Karski’s interview with Claude Lanzmann, in the Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection (note 30), 68.

32. See note 3.

33. Worth quoting as an example here is the way the testimony of Yugoslav resistance fighters interned in the camp at Banjica were edited after the war. In the introduction to his article (cited below) Jovan Byford stresses that the accounts were always ‘socially mediated and contextually and institutionally embedded’; he then goes on to study the cuts made in the published versions between 1967 and the present, and concludes, regarding the accounts of those involved, that ‘there were only usable stories, or rather fragments of testimonies deemed “believable” by those who selected them for publication.’ Jovan BYFORD, “Shortly afterwards, we hear the sound of the gas van.” Survivor Testimony and the Writing of History in Socialist Yugoslavia,’ History & Memory 22, no. 1 (spring/summer 2010): 5–47.

34. The International Liberators Conference, supported by the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, was held at the U.S. State Department in Washington, DC, on October 26–28, 1981.

35. Former executive director of the War Refugee Board (WRB), created by the Roosevelt administration at the end of the war to aid the Jews of Europe.

36. Commander of the Soviet troops who liberated Auschwitz.

37. Historian and archivist, head of the Modern Military Branch, U.S. National Archives.

38. ‘Discovering the Final Solution’ panel (Story RG-60.3814, tape 2656). Karski’s contribution, time code: 10:40:39–11:08:44. Marvin Kalb’s questions and Jan Karski’s answers are on cassette 2659, time code: 1:11:09–1:14:34.


40. Ibid., 176.

41. A copy of the published version of the text, with annotations indicating the differences from the original, is in the possession of the author.

42. Jan Karski quoted in B. S. CHAMBERLIN and M. FELDMAN, eds., The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945 (note 39), 191.

43. ‘I remember when I reported to Zygielbojm. When he asked, so what they want me to do? No, first of all he told me that he didn’t like me. He was suspicious. He said, you didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know before. So, then, what they want me to do? He means the Jewish leaders so I gave it to him and I was saying the truth: let the Jews abroad go to the Offices, if their demands are not met, let them refuse food, let them refuse drink, let them die, slow death, in the streets, we are dying as well, perhaps the world conscience will be aroused. Zygielbojm: so what? It is impossible, they will send them to policeman and arrest me as insane and send me to a psychiatric institution. It cannot be done. So then … and then: so what they want me to do? He was irrational, I cannot do it, but I have to do it? How can I do it, if I don’t know what to do? Madness, Madness! The world is mad! Now I don’t speak to my students about Belzec or … the Ghetto. When I speak about the World War II I speak Szmul Zygielbojm. They will be able to understand. It stayed in my mind. Now, he left a greater impression than Belzec and the Ghetto.
Szmul Zygielbojm. He committed suicide then ... in May 1943 ... put on gas. But at this time, I remember, when Szmul Zygielbojm was acting this way, I was annoyed. Mainly he continued to play that act: I am going to be late for the next meeting.' Transcribed by the author from the original talk (see note 38).

44. The Bund was an anti-Zionist socialist party in Poland: Yehuda BAUER, The Holocaust in Historical Perspective (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 20.

45. I won’t dwell here on the fact that the transition from audiovisual source to written text involves in itself a loss of information. For example, when Karski says, in the original interview, ‘No funny inspiration, paint as I telling you’ [11:05:39-11:05:41], he speaks with an odd accent, striking the desk with the palm of his hand and then remaining silent for a short time before beginning again. None of this is noted in the text.

46. As Ilsen About and Clément Chéroux have written regarding another medium, the task of the historian is not to ‘reduce the photograph to a simple rectangle or image-square supposedly containing all the elements required for our examination of it. Every image possesses a context that must be known if we are to understand it historically’: Ilsen ABOUT and Clément CHÉROUX, ‘L’Histoire par la photographie,’ Études photographiques, 2001, no. 10 (November): 20. See also C. CHÉROUX, ed., Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d’extermination nazis, 1933-1999 (Paris: Marval, 2001); Audrey LEBLANC and R. BESSON, ‘La Part de l’introduction,’ Conserveries mémorielles, no. 6, 2009, put online December 26, 2009, consulted January 2, 2011 (http://cm.revues.org/336).

ABSTRACTS

In 1977 Claude Lanzmann and his film team made contact with the Polish Resistance courier Jan Karski. Late in 1978, after a silence lasting more than thirty years, Karski agreed to be filmed at home for two days. In Shoah (1985), Lanzmann used 39 minutes of the Karski footage; and in 2010 he returned to the original interview for a new film, The Karski Report, shown on the Franco-German channel Arte. Separated by twenty-five years, Shoah and The Karski Report have both been regarded as documentaries in the commonly accepted sense – that is, as films providing the most direct possible access to the words of those speaking. Regarding both films the director stresses his wish to communicate ‘the truth,’ but what he has said about them and the visual choices made in each are very different. It would seem that the communication of the truth he aspires to takes different forms according to the filmmaking context and in more general terms raises the issue of the role of mediation in the making of a ‘documentary’ film.

AUTHORS

RÉMY BESSON

Rémy Besson is a PhD candidate in History at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales; he is also associated with the Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent. His PhD dissertation, under the direction of Christian Delage, examines the shaping of narrative in the film Shoah by Claude Lanzmann. Since 2008 he has coordinated a workshop at the Laboratoire d’Histoire Visuelle Contemporaine (Lhivic) on ‘Issues of Narration in Documentary Cinema.’ He co-edited an issue of
the journal *Conserveries Mémorielles* with Audrey Leblanc on 'The Role of Fiction in Documentary Images' (2009). He is a member of the editorial committee of *Culture Visuelle* (http://culturevisuelle.org/).