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The Countess Against the Barbarians

In September 1939, the Third Reich and the Soviet Union launched the Second World War by attacking Poland. Most Polish patriots logically concluded that their homeland had two totalitarian enemies: Hitler and Stalin. In *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück* a professor of art history at the John Casimir University in Lwów, Countess Karolina Lanckorońska, recounts her amazing contributions to the struggle against them. The Countess resisted and she paid dearly. Although she fled the Soviet secret police, she became a prisoner of the dreaded Gestapo and an inmate in the infamous Ravensbrück concentration camp. Hers was a fight to preserve Poland's multifarious heritage for "without tradition there can be no culture" (p. 22). Her words and deeds ring of the steely steadiness of the mighty swords of the Crusaders.

Countess Karolina Lanckorońska came from one of the most illustrious families of Poland. The Lanckorońskis of the Zadora ("fire belching lion") clan trace their roots back to the early medieval times but ascended to the top during the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They held on to their lofty position during the Partitions as well. Karolina's father, Count Karol, was a famous art collector and patron, a fabulously wealthy land owner, and a one time favorite of the Habsburgs. Her mother Małgorzata Eleonore, neé von Lichnowsky, came from a very well-heeled Prussian family with Polish roots. Her brother had been Wilhelmine Germany's last ambassador to England.

Baptised after Saint Charles Borromeo, Karolina was born in Austria and spent most of her time in "my beloved Italy," studying art history (p. 151). From the cradle she was immersed in a cosmopolitan milieu of aristocrats, scholars, and artists. Nonetheless, she elected to become a Polish patriot because of her family background. As she explains to a hostile commoner, who also happened to be her underground superior,

"If you did not like my class origin...., if the trouble is my [aristocratic] name...., I consider that merely increases my obligation to Poland. If the name is well known, it's because people of that name fought – and not at all badly, it would seem, since they were so often in command! They fought at all the periods of Poland's greatest need: from the Battle of Grünwald [in 1410] to the Siege of Vienna [in 1683]. That's my family background! And today, not wishing to bring shame on those ancestors, I am entitled to ask for the chance to risk my life on a worthwhile job. Is this any time for such nonsense as class prejudice?" (p. 48).

Of her upbringing she notes, "youthful ideals do not pall. They develop and mature with the individual. He who vows allegiance to them in youth will always try to realize them, even if only in part, but he who, when young, swears fidelity to nothing and nobody does not suddenly later discover ideals for life, because he has none. One who is born blind does not become sighted with age" (p. 164). When ruminating on her departed father and her family friends, who had had such an enormous impact on her, the Countess underlines profoundly the importance of transmitting tradition to the future generations:

Friendship does not come to an end with the death of the friend. The true end of friendship would be the loss of the precious standards inherited from one's friend. A friend is still alive, so long as his influence on us or his example survives. Moreover, if we succeed in transmitting those values to others, that friendship will still not perish with our death, but be passed to still more persons, even to peoples... We are nothing in ourselves, but we must pass on the torch of Plato... then we become the links of a chain that embraces the world. That is the true tradition (p. 172).

As befitted her cosmopolitan upbringing, her German was flawless, her Italian idiomatic, her French elegant, and her English distinguished. She also knew Greek and Latin. Her memoir is peppered with references to Plato, Thucydides, Marcus Aurelius, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Lord Acton, Emily Brontë, Arthur H. Clough, Goethe, Norwid, Mickiewicz, and others. Love of learning permeates her recollections. The Countess wanted to share it with others: “to make education available to all who want it, without lowering standards, is one of humanity’s highest ideals” (p. 58). She mused on the masterpieces of Homer, Xenophone, Caesar, Bosch, Bach, Swift, Bethoven, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Hölderin. And she actively sought the company of peers who shared her sublime aestheticism. “The hours I spent in [Professor Roman] Dyboski’s library were the happiest during the whole six years of war, for reading was interspersed with conversations about English, French, German, Latin, Greek, Italian and, above all, Polish culture” (p. 51). The Countess frequently deployed her enormous erudition to fight the Good Fight.

There hardly any among the totalitarians who could keep a candle to her. Most Soviets she chanced upon were apparently uncouth ignoramuses. For example, after failing to make herself understood in any language, she spoke Latin to “Professor Golkin” who was appointed Dean/commissar of the History Department at the University of Lwów. The commissar knew no languages but Russian and quickly left her alone (p. 8). She duly noted the utility of being hermetic and employed this trick throughout her war-time adventures. To turn off an unwanted Nazi suitor on a “Germans-only train”, while on an assignment for the underground, she showed him a copy of *The Annales* in Latin (p. 86). To put down her ignorantly pompous Gestapo interrogator, she quoted Schiller in German (p. 123-124). To annoy her jumpy SS guard, she recited *The Illiad* in Greek (p. 171-172). The Countess delighted, however, in sharing knowledge with her fellow victims. To cheer up a fellow prisoner, she passed on to her an unflattering description of the Germans from *De Bello Gallico* (p. 220). To ease the suffering of other inmates, she loaned them her illicit copy of *King Lear*, which “was proof that the world still existed” (p. 269).

Lanckorońska kept notes on art and art history both in jail and at the concentration camp. To free her spirit, while imprisoned, “each day I transported myself mentally to one of the great European picture galleries and viewed the paintings. Naturally, I started with the gallery in Vienna.... Then came the Prado, the Louvre, the Uffizi and Venice” (p. 132). She pondered the fine points of methodology: “I began to reflect for the first time on how a historian of the future, in presenting the history of this war, will need to adopt a distinctive method” (p. 98). She also “discussed the problem of how to explain to academic youth the meaning of scholarly work; what in the broadest sense is Learning, and what purpose does it serve?” (p. 172). To understand her own predicament at the hands of the Nazis she read, while incarcerated, both Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (“the whole enormous blueprint for crime on an international scale,” p. 191) and Alfred Rosenberg’s *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts* (“in which the mystique of physical labour and hatred for the moral strength of Christianity are combined to provide a theoretical basis for a regime of violence and compulsion. Stalin’s aim was very similar” p. 215). Last but not least, she lectured on Roman history, medieval culture, and Italian Renaissance, including her beloved Michelangelo, to fellow inmates in Ravensbrück (p. 238, 269-70, 281-282).

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One could say that her family background and her education prepared her for the calamity of the Second World War. But nothing served her as well as her formidable Christian faith. She had already overcome her youthful skepticism long before the war (p. 236). Initially rather perfunctory, her belief gradually grew in strength to blossom with a mighty force between 1939 and 1945. She frequently writes about taking Holy Communion, and “kneeling and giving thanks” in Cracow (p. 75); or describes how, in Tarnów, she “escaped to the cathedral. There I gave thanks, sobbing helplessly” (p. 82); in Nowy Sącz, “on my way from the station I dropped in at the church. Mass was in progress, so I knelt down near the entrance... I had never before felt so strongly that measureless bond between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant” (p.

93-94); in Równe, Volhynia, “I went into a church and chanced upon a High Mass” (p. 104); and in jail in Stanisławów, “we all of us prayed, without exception: Poles and Ukrainians; degraded women of the streets and innocent girls, once carefree and well loved – all of us beseeching salvation from a death so close and a life of hunger, sickness, lice and filth; all appealing to the supreme feminine ideal of our culture,” St. Mary (p. 138). She survived her ordeal partly because “my Catholic convictions forbade” suicide (p. 124).

Nonetheless, the Countess had to contend with periodic assaults on her faith by her tormentors. When an SS officer at Ravensbrück tried to prevail on her to end her hunger strike and to abjure “the worst thing of all –... Catholicism,” she dismissed him with a scornful silence (p. 234). At another time, the SS wardens confiscated “Catholic prayers” from her, in reality a selection of Petrarch’s love sonnets (p. 215).

Faith was a crucial component of Lanckorońska’s mental universe. Faced with incredible atrocities, she did not experience a crisis of faith *per se*. Instead, she developed an acute problem with forgiving the oppressors. The process was gradual. At the initial stages of the Nazi occupation in Cracow, “when I told him [the priest] that my soul was dominated by hatred and the desire for revenge, but not on my own behalf, he consoled me by saying the Lord God is admittedly slow to act, but is nevertheless very just. As for loving our enemies, the old priest – praise be to God – did not press the point” (p. 84). But the breaking point came in the spring of 1942, at the Łacki Street prison in Lwów, when she witnessed repeatedly the SS guards fighting over various goods confiscated mostly from the murdered Jews and other prisoners. Lanckorońska resolved arbitrarily to omit the phrase “as we forgive those who trespass against us” from the Lord’s Prayer “and recited my mutilated version till the end of the war” (p. 166).

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For the Countess, the war had a pronouncedly metaphysical dimension: good vs. evil. The fight against evil occurred on several levels. It was a struggle between the wholesome world of Christian values and noble traditions and the brave new world of national and international socialist “modernity”. The conflict was also a nationalist affair, pitting the Poles, on the one hand, and the Teutonic Nazi and Soviet “Asiatic” barbarians, including some auxiliaries from among Poland’s national minorities, on the other. As she puts it so eloquently:

“There was only that collective moral strength, which was *Polishness*. Notwithstanding our total individualism, each one of us felt part of a monolith. As a result, something akin to mass ecstasy evolved, which naturally intensified in each of us in proportion to the increasing imminence of death, merely by virtue of being a true Pole. That incredible strength in tension still had its roots somewhere else as well.

The sentiment with which each of us, and all at the same time, was charged to the brim was by no means solely nationalism. Clearly, love of our country, whose existence was threatened, gained strength with every day that passed. But the struggle was being waged not only about the life of the nation, but simply about everything that made life worth living – all the ideals dear to each one of us. It was about Christianity, the rights of the individual, the dignity of man. We often gave thanks to God for the one thing left to us: the awareness that we were dying in defense of the highest values of humanity. Based on this consciousness, an atmosphere developed that was often reminiscent of what we know of the spirit of the Crusades. The very fact that was present a spiritual and universal element in this struggle provided a firm link with the Middle Ages” (p. 90).

It was imperative to oppose the nihilistic barbarians because they destroy beauty, including human beings, the repositories of history. The nation is the sum of individual narratives which, interwoven, produce the tapestry of the national tradition. “The more people we have among us

robbed of their past, the greater the threatened decline of tradition and spiritual continuity – in a word, culture” (p. 34).

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In late September 1939 Countess Karolina found herself under the Soviet occupation. “If it had to be that the whole country had to lose its independence for months on end (till spring, say), then I was glad to be in the Russian occupied part. The experience was bound to be more interesting and, besides, the concept of human dignity, which provides the basis of our inner being, occupies much space in the theory of Communism, whereas Hitler had abolished it in favour of the zoological cult of racism” (p. 7).

Initially, “The Bolsheviks,” as she likes to refer to them, elicited mildly amusing disdain: “Comrades might turn up at the theatre in an alluring silk nightdress, or use chamberpots for watering the flowers” (p. 4). A Soviet officer who was billeted upon her apartment washed his hair in the toilet bowl. He would flush the toilet and become enraged with the brevity of the “shower.” Consequently, “waving his revolver,” he accosted the serving girl of the Countesses “and accused her of sabotage” (p. 11).

Slowly, a scornful amusement yielded way to hatred and fear. The Red Terror and a constant barrage of anti-Polish propaganda turned “the workers of Lwów against the new regime from the very outset” (p. 2). The Soviets targeted the traditional elite first. Landed noble estates, including Lanckorońska’s own Komarno, were ransacked already in September 1939. At her late father’s Rozdół, “the bathrooms were totally wrecked, because the Bolsheviks, who used the mansion as a rest house, destroyed them as relics of the bourgeoisie. They also turned the chapel into a canteen” (p. 112). Some nobles were killed. The Churches were subject to an overwhelming tax “but no clergy were arrested other than on solid political grounds” (p. 25). Soon, the terror metastasized, embracing all categories of the “enemies of the people.” Everywhere, “more and more people were arrested, mostly young men” (p. 14). The prisoners were frequently tortured, “often with nails being driven under the fingernails” (p. 30). Mass deportations to the Gulag commenced in February with the second wave in April 1940.

At the University of Lwów, “of young Polish males there was not a sign; they were in hiding” (p. 7). Gradually, the Soviets sent their own “scholars” to replace pre-war academics. Most were wretchedly unqualified. “Some even betrayed partial acquaintance with civilised conventions,” the Countess notes icily (p. 8). One “scholar” specializing in “German History” knew only Russian. About the Dean: “as he was the Professor of Leninism and Stalinism, of course he had absolutely no need of Roman letters” (p. 9). The university library (“Fascist library!”) was purged; many art books were destroyed as “pornography” (p. 10). A degenerative malaise descended on all: “The lectures were of such poor quality that they were barely worth preparing, and research was out of the question. The quality of the students, too, was steadily declining. The tremendously debilitating absence of all initiative was paralyzing not only the university, but all Lwów. Everyone... was theoretically employed, but nobody was actually working” (p. 30-31).

As a result, “I looked around at it all and terror seized me at the sight of this fragment of Asia that had descended on Lwów. It was so tragically evident that the East was devouring us. We were being swamped” (p. 17). Lanckorońska understood that “from the east our lands were inundated... by a wave of socially inchoate barbarism, fighting against us under the banner of social slogans deriving in large part from an inferiority complex and a hatred of the indigenous culture which the invaders did not possess. Because that culture happened to be Polish, everything Polish had to be destroyed” (p. 22). The destruction of the Polish culture proceeded by the insidiously sophisticated means of Sovietizing it, rather than banning it outright like the Nazis did. Therefore, because of their crudity and a direct assault on the Polish culture, the Nazis were a lesser threat to the Poles than the Soviets, according to Lanckorońska.

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At the beginning at least, things were easier for the Christian Poles as far as Nazi economic and social arrangements were concerned. "The German-occupied Poland was spared that economic catastrophe [of the Soviet-dominated Eastern Borderlands]. Nor, above all, did it undergo the total Asianisation of its lifestyle, or the abandonment of certain ingrained European conventions" (p. 41). Yet, there was a great deal of similarities between both occupiers. For example, at Rozdół, her late father's principal estate, "The Bolsheviks had made off with almost everything of value. The Germans had then taken whatever was left" (p. 111). In another instance, the Countess notices with dismay that the furniture in her Gestapo cell had belonged to the NKVD (p. 132). After a short while, even in eastern Poland, "nobody was talking any more about the 'European' quality of the [Nazi] occupation or the personal probity of the occupiers... One occupying power was no better than the other, or rather nobody knew which was worse" (p. 101). It took Nazi terror to infuriate the "simple people who had initially been impressed by the Germans" (p. 53). Round ups (*Menschenfangen*), deportations to concentration camps, arbitrary arrests, hostage taking, mass executions, and, last but not least, the extermination of the Jews soon became the staple of everyday life.

Nonetheless, there was a difference between Nazi and Soviet terror: "In the whole of this inconceivable tragedy there was only one redeeming feature, compared with the arrests and deportations organised by our invader from the East. With the Russians, people disappeared like a stone in water; nobody could ever find out anything about them, let alone renew contact with them. It was different here – thanks to the Germans" (p. 64). First, certain pre-war regulations retained by the Nazis and their new rules regarding prisons facilitated legal contact between a charitable institution and the victims. Second, the avarice of the German overseers of the system greased the wheels of interchange between charity/underground operatives and the prisoners. Therefore it was easier to deceive the Germans than the Russians. It was easier to operate within the Nazi system of occupation.

Ultimately, however, according to the Countess, the Nazis were

"no better than the Muscovites – only a bit more stupid... They were more stupid, but they also had other commendable features that became apparent only when compared with the invader from the east.... The Russian domination had left in its wake deep traces of terrible depression... We could now understand how it was that the reactions evoked in us by the German occupation differed so fundamentally from those produced by the Soviets. The German way of going about things irritated and incensed us to a very high degree. On top of that, the persecution of *all* Poles aroused in our society something that nobody who experienced that occupation will ever forget – the consciousness of complete unity among the Polish people... Anybody who was with Hitler was by definition a scoundrel; but anyone who, at first, had illusions about the Soviets was not necessarily a villain since, in the theory of Communism, there was a good deal of idealism... It was only after closer acquaintance that people's eyes were opened to the endless desert of lies, terror and cruelty, to the real aims of Moscow" (p. 91).

The Countess was troubled in particular by the attitude of some liberals, progressives, and leftists toward Communism. Even when in Ravensbrück, she fought against that. "Our young people at that time were being overtly bombarded by Communist propaganda. One had to do everything within one's power to counteract it by doing what was often very difficult namely, *telling the truth*, by explaining to those who asked the exact nature of Communism" (p. 271). And tell the truth she did, because "as an academic teacher, I had special duties to the young, which I intended to fulfil – to the end" (p. 271). When a liberal friend and a fellow inmate objected and, instead, preached co-existence with the Soviets and their lackeys, Lanckorońska put her straight. Of the friend, the Countess avers with sadness that "she was a woman of such conviction, but at the same time so naïve, that she was simply unable to believe in Evil... I knew that her intentions

were of the purest. I also knew, however, that honourable people who are unable to imagine Evil can be very dangerous” (p. 248, 272).

The practical side of Lanckorońska’s attitude toward the Nazis and Communists is best expressed by the following: “We believed that a German-Russian war was the only way to solve the Polish problem and were impatiently looking forward to its outbreak. We firmly believed that the Germans would beat the Muscovites, after which the Germans, already weakened, would be finished off by the Allies. Then, both our enemies having fallen, Poland would rise between them, morally powerful in the unity and collective harmony imparted to us by this terrible struggle” (p. 66).

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True to her beliefs, the Countess resisted the occupiers from the very start. Her first acts were spontaneous, as when she organized a women’s demonstration to defend her apartment building from a coal seizure by the Communist militia (p. 19). Karolina suavely manipulated the system, insisting on the illegality of the seizure. At other times, she would also haughtily invoke “Soviet legality” before baffled officials. When a Red Army officer billeted upon her apartment became abusive, attempting to claim the whole place for himself, she brought all her tenants to complain to the Military Prosecutor’s Office. The Countess stressed not only that the officer persecuted the working class but also interfered with her university duties. Lanckorońska thus implied that the officer was “the enemy of the people,” sabotaging Soviet work. This was a perfect rouse in harmony with Communist thinking. The authorities demoted the officer to private and expelled him from the apartment (p. 11-12).

This became her trademark *modus operandi*. She would afterward frequently resist the totalitarian systems from within, insisting on the legality of her actions, including under the Nazis. Meanwhile, on January 2, 1940, she officially joined the underground Union of Armed Struggle, later the Home Army (AK) (p. 20). Because of her activities, the Countess had to flee, in spring 1940, to Nazi occupied Poland.

In Cracow, she immediately rejoined the underground. She collected the names of the victims deported to the Gulag. She wrote leaflets in German intended to spread defeatism to the occupying force. She chaperoned a fugitive English POW. She served as a liaison with the underground authorities in Warsaw. Meanwhile, the Countess also worked for the Red Cross. Her tasks included caring for wounded Polish POWs. Thus, on an underground assignment, she worked within the system. To deflect any suspicion, she took care of both political and criminal detainees. About 27,000 prisoners benefited from the relief effort. “I wanted to fulfill my dream of being able to arrange for the common feeding of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians” (p. 99).

She used the haughty aristocrat approach to ease the lot of the prisoners by securing audiences with the likes of General Rothkirch, SS-General Thomas, civilian prosecutor Paul Rotter, and a bevy of Gestapomen. Lanckorońska was immensely successful in her enterprise, so much so that her very success threatened her reputation. “My regular visits to the Gestapo attracted such lively comment that the [underground] authorities were warned against me several times, and I was driven to appeal to my [clandestine] military superior to make sure that my name would be cleared after the war, in case of my death” (p. 105). As it were, Home Army Commander-in-Chief General Tadeusz Count Komorowski (“Bór”) awarded her the Cross of Valor (p. 115). The Countess wore two hats: an underground and a legal one. She combined them both admirably. “It was not long before almost every prison had two relief schemes in action – one legal, the other clandestine – which complemented one another” (p. 98-99).

Like earlier under the Soviet rule, also under the Nazi system, Lanckorońska brilliantly exploited the occupier’s “legality.” She also drew on her intimate knowledge of the German culture and social mores. She ordered, begged, cajoled, and bribed the Nazis. One time, to deliver food to prison, she commandeered German trucks, “after explaining to their drivers in an

imperious manner that they must take us there at once. We knew perfectly well that a polite request would have been flatly refused” (p. 57).

Lanckorońska continued to take advantage of the system even after her arrest. In Lwów she was permitted food parcels and was thus able secretly to share food with fellow prisoners. “The Germans (who, fortunately, cease to think once a *Befehl* [order] has been given) were never amazed at the continuing phenomenal appetite of this one prisoner” (p. 171). At Ravensbrück, because she retained her mail and book borrowing privileges, the Countess continued to encrypt messages in them for the underground and sent them back to Poland, reporting, for example, on pseudo-medical experiments on women, the so-called “rabbits” (p. 233). At other times, her acts of resistance were a matter of reflex. She witnessed once that during a selection a Jewess and a Polish Christian were pushed to the side and slated for extermination. The Countess immediately exclaimed to an SS-doctor (“Germans are always impressed if shouted at”) in charge of the selection that the two girls were slackers, avoiding work. The SS-man chastised them and allowed Lanckorońska to take them away “to work,” thus saving them from a certain death (p. 278). Another time, the Countess contrived aristocratic names for a number of French and Polish women, entered them into the camp official rolls, thus making them privileged prisoners. “Nobody whose name was on our list was subsequently gassed” (p. 279).

But she did not always win with the system. Although her hunger strike facilitated her release into the general population, the Nazis forced her to become a prisoner-trustee. She tried to get out of it by submitting her resignation to the camp commander. The latter inquired with Berlin. However, Himmler refused her request. “This was undoubtedly the bitterest moment of my entire captivity, the only one in which I felt truly unhappy” (p. 249).

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“Looking back, after all these years, I realize how very privileged I was in those days, in contrast to millions of my compatriots,” Lanckorońska readily admits (p. 121). She was a privileged prisoner of the Nazis because her case was highly unusual. She was initially arrested as a self-admitted enemy of the Third Reich. Then, in a bout of vicious boasting, her interrogating Gestapo officer SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Krüger revealed a state secret to her. Namely, he blurted that he had personally supervised the mass execution of Polish scholars in Lwów in July 1941. Lanckorońska repeated the account to another Gestapoman, who reported his rival to their superiors in Berlin. The case reached the highest levels of power. Hitler himself read the report. Himmler was furious. Krüger was recalled and the Countess’s case became completely entangled with his. She was spared execution and, instead, was brought to Ravensbrück to await his trail, as it turned out indefinitely, as a material witness (p. 122-126, 153-155, 176). There were other reasons why she was designated a privileged prisoner.

Generally, the Nazis were confused about how to handle the Countess. First, there was the “race” card. Technically, she was half-German. Her nemesis Krüger “reproached me for my particularly outrageous behaviour, since he knew moreover that my mother was a German” (p. 118). He told her that “I was being punished for my behaviour as the daughter of a German woman. ‘You are going to the [concentration] camp as a renegade.’” (p. 124). At Ravensbrück, the Chief Medical Officer of the SS dismissed her “Polishness” and complemented her on her “Germanic looks” and family background. “I replied that, as for my looks, my features were distinctly non-Aryan because I bore a striking resemblance to my Hungarian great-grandmother. If there was any question about my racial origins, I was a European mongrel with regard to the number of nationalities concerned in my descent, and these I enumerated for him. The doctor quickly took leave of me and never again spoke of race” (p. 226-227).

Her native fluency of German and her German roots made her a hard case in the Nazi racist dialectical universe. To boot, she was very well connected not only among the Italian royals (p. 149, 222), but also among the International Red Cross leaders, counting President Carl Burckhardt as her personal friend (p. 275). As a result, Himmler ordered special privileges for her,

including a separate jail cell, food parcels, and books. At Ravensbrück he even insisted on supplementing her diet with tomatoes and segregating her from the general population, a move she fiercely resisted, going twice on a hunger strike. Then the Nazis sent her a physician to look after her and another SS officer to reason with her (p. 150, 231). Earlier, while at the prison in Lwów, she was once permitted to stroll outside the prison walls but her German overseer gave her his golden watch to ascertain that she would return. True to feudal and Christian form, she did (p. 155-156). The Countess certainly was not a run of the mill prisoner.

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One could claim that feudal and Christian ways failed to protect her. Returning to jail when she could have fled? That's silly! More still, when under interrogation, Lanckorońska was pushed by Krüger to admit that she was Germany's enemy. He did not trick her; she simply found herself incapable to lie (p. 116-119, 122-126). How naive, undoubtedly some would exclaim. On the other hand, she pushed the Gestapo officer to reveal the secret of the murder of the professors of Lwów. And that mattered to her more than her own safety. Also, when she testified about Krüger before Himmler's chief SS-counsel in Berlin, the lawyer believed her, in particular when she insisted that "it may well be unpleasant, but I have never yet said anything about anybody that I was not prepared to repeat to his face" (p. 186).

Christian feudalism thus served her well. It was a way of life and she would have no other. One of the greatest struggles in our sojourn here on this vale of tears is to stay true to oneself. The Countess succeeded mostly by organizing her universe and people in it to conform to what she deemed as right and righteous. And the people she surrounded herself with invariably did the right thing.

In that universe, loyalty works both ways. On the one hand, her faithful serving girl Andzia salvaged her precious thesis on Michelangelo from her county estate ransacked by the Soviets (p. 3, 92). And later, there was more: "the NKVD in Lwów had sent an enquiry to the local authorities in Komarno concerning my pre-war relations with the people of the area. The local council committee gave me a flattering testimonial" (p. 31). On the other hand, the Countess received a procession of peasants and estate employees with "requests for help from me" in the wake of the mass deportations to Siberia (p. 27-28). She was the authority the people turned to. She was the source of strength and hope. They relied on her and she did everything she could to help them. She simply discharged her Christian feudal obligation.

Sometimes her very presence was soothing. Sometimes the irrationality of hope invested in her is heart-wrenching, as when, in early 1942, she chanced upon a Jewish woman walking in the environs of her estate and the latter exclaimed: "Why Lanckorońska!... That settles it – the worst is over. Everything's going to be all right" (p. 111). The very presence of the Countess in the wake of the Soviets and in the midst of the Nazis produced "unfounded optimism" based on the fact that her wholesome Christian feudalism was positively antithetical to rampaging totalitarianism. Her presence indicated the possibility of salvation.

Naturally, she performed incredible feats but she was not superhuman. She expected the most from herself. She also expected much of her own class. And the nobles delivered, working clandestinely for the liberation of Poland. "Practically every manor house and palace, where the owners were still in residence, was as good as a fortress," she recalls matter-of-factly (p. 50). She found it quite normal that a noble family of her acquaintance was hiding a Jew in Volhynia (p. 103). Formidable individuals from her social milieux stand out in the pages of her memoirs. One cannot help but admire Archbishop Prince Sapieha, clandestine operative Jadwiga Horodyska, or Maria Krzeczunowicz ("Dzidzia") of the AK and "Roland's Shield," a secret organization of the nobility. Of the Home Army's Maria Bortnowska ("Niuta"), who was also a fellow prisoner, the Countess admits: "I had been immensely impressed by her intelligence, so rarely combined with an indomitable personality.... Niuta did not know the meaning of the word 'compromise'" (p. 263),

for there is no compromise with evil. Niuta was staunchly anti-Nazi and anti-Communist, of course.

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Anti-Nazis and anti-Communism were the twin yardsticks Karolina Lanckorońska measured others with. This was logical. One cannot be a lover of freedom and truth and kow-tow to either Communism or Nazism. "The Poles... were the largest national group in the camp and decidedly anti-Communist," she proudly recalls, taking their anti-Nazism for granted (p. 208). Despite her weak spot for the nobility she realized that the struggle against the totalitarians entailed the collective effort of the nation. And she readily recognized that "the real hero [of the war] is the average citizen of the Republic, peasant or intellectual, landowner or priest, country girl or university woman" (p. 98). Yet, the Countess also understood clearly not only that "the real hero" could harken from any background, but also that he or she was not the average Pole. The hero, by definition, was exceptional. Hence she worries: "Who would be left, ready and able to work, when at last Poland returned? For nearly three years now, the best of people had been dying for her. But who would be left to live for her?" (p. 137).

Hers was not a crudely nationalistic glorification of the Poles, but an ethical one of Polish individuals. The term "Pole" was an honorific for Lanckorońska. She was perfectly capable of differentiating between various human beings who happened to speak Polish. "There are a lot of Polish women in the camp, but they are a very mixed assortment. The great bulk of them are, to say the least, women without much in the way of guiding principles. Many are common criminals" (p. 203) The Countess bemoaned the demoralization rampant among the inmates, including stealing ("lust for possession"), and other pathologies, especially among the lower classes. She even allowed that, "obviously, [even] among the Polish political prisoners there were persons of varied moral values. The fact that someone had taken part in the struggle for independence could not in itself be the sole criterion of his or her standard of private morality" (p. 239). Thus, her analysis of "Polishness" is superbly nuanced. She was likewise careful regarding other nationalities at the concentration camp.

Lanckorońska admired the Norwegians much for they were all political prisoners. And so were many of the Greek women she liked. Only a few of the French passed her muster, though. Aside from the aristocrats, most French inmates blamed the Poles for the war, and some of them were also of dubious morality. The token British were baffled and pathetic and, thus, evoked nothing but pity. The Countess disliked the Czechs for they were pro-Soviet, although she made an exception for a Czech physician on the account of the woman's profoundly humanitarian disposition. Lanckorońska's disdain for the Soviet female POWs at Ravensbrück was palpable:

"They were held in high esteem by all nationalities in the camp, with the exception of the Poles... The 'Soviets' accepted the homage and the gifts, but paid little attention to the other groups, while maintaining close solidarity among themselves. The Poles they treated with concealed ill-will, which, in exceptional cases, was displayed openly. As a rule, one was only aware of the infinitely alien uncouthness of these girls, whose most pronounced characteristic was mistrust.... The Soviets hardly differed in any way one from another. They were even physically alike, and their reactions were identical to those of their leaders" (p. 235-236).

Yet, the Countess admitted that individual Russian girls could be decent (if unaccompanied by other comrades). She further justly gives the Soviets credit for having sabotaged the electric grid of the camp to help "the rabbits," mostly Polish women who were victims of pseudo-medical experiments. The ensuing confusion allowed "the rabbits," who were slated for extermination, to disperse and mingle with the general population, which saved most of them from death (p. 273). Lanckorońska nonetheless points out that the sabotage action came in

the wake of an earlier successful resistance operation when other prisoners had helped “the rabbits” to hide which resulted in the suspension of the pseudo-experiments (p. 229).

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Lanckorońska's experience with the Ukrainians pre-dated Ravensbrück. Already during the Soviet occupation, “so far as the business of everyday life was concerned, we had to contend far more often with simple and coarsely simplistic Ukrainian nationalism than with Communism or Russian imperialism” (p. 22). She also notes various Ukrainian transgressions against the Poles. When the Soviets deported the Poles of Klicko Kolonia in February 1940, “Ukrainians from nearby villages moved in and occupied their homesteads” (p. 27). She alleges that the Ukrainians supplied first the Soviets and then the Nazis with proscription lists of the Poles, who were either arrested or killed (p. 28, 153). She recalls bitter feuds between Polish and Ukrainian medical and welfare personnel at a Cracow hospital (p. 56). She notes the looming menace of the Ukrainian SS-men (p. 114). Upon observing the anti-Ukrainian animus of their Polish victims, “it was then that I realized what an enormous source of strength the craving for revenge is, and what naïve dreamers we were who often imagined that, after this terrible remedy, the two communities might one day find it possible to live together, or even share a platform” (p. 28).

Yet, she also remembers with gratitude that, when she was initially imprisoned, “that night a Ukrainian guard opened the window looking out on the courtyard for a few hours, making me swear not to betray him” (p. 132). She admits further that, as far as the wounded POWs at the Cracow hospital, “we naturally treated the Ukrainians in exactly the same way as the Poles” (p. 60). She was quite fond of a fellow inmate in Lwów, Andrei Piaseckyj: “he sincerely hated the Germans, ... while also towards the Bolsheviks his attitude was decidedly negative. I told him I was convinced that neither Ukrainian-Bolshevik nor Ukrainian-German friendship could alter the fact that the Poles and Ukrainians must find a *modus vivendi*. I could see that this honest and honourable man could not fail to recognize the validity of the argument, but that he could not rid himself overnight of the prejudices of his Ukrainian nationalist upbringing” (p. 157). Last but not least, at Ravensbrück, the Countess was also most impressed with “a Ukrainian woman who was prepared to be kicked till she bled, rather than surrender her rosary” (p. 259).

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Lanckorońska's attitude towards Jews was also dictated by her anti-Nazism and anti-Communism, as well as her Christian faith, her upbringing, and her education: “I was brought up in a spirit of hostility to anti-Semitism, which has remained my attitude throughout” (p. 30). Of the Soviet secret police, she notices a certain curious contradiction: “Particularly noteworthy was the NKVD's extreme anti-Semitism towards the Jews, who were numerically predominant in this institution” (p. 23). Obviously, one deals here with two distinct types of human beings: pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet Jews. She recalls that “sometimes the torturers were Jewish. A large number of Jews were involved, working for the NKVD together with Communist-inclined members of the Jewish proletariat, which had largely supported the Bolsheviks from the outset. Happily, however, I can assert that there were also Jews of another kind.” (p. 30).

And there were plenty of Jews of another kind. She appreciated the Jewish black marketers who resisted the Soviets and helped the population of Lwów cheat the Communists in currency transactions (p. 17). Further, she benefited from Jewish assistance directly thrice:

“One day a stranger called on me, apologised for not revealing his name and explained that he was a Jew, which was why he had approached me. He begged me to remove everything I valued from the flat, or I would lose the lot. They [the Soviets] were going to deal with all Poles, he said, and the most vulnerable of all, of course, were those with ‘counter-revolutionary antecedents’. He finished by saying that he had come as a Jew because, although he did not know me personally, he felt it his duty to call on someone who, at the university, had

opposed the beating up of Jews. With that, he went away. There were two more visits of this sort – one with an offer of money” (p. 30).

The tables were turned when the Countess escaped to Nazi-occupied central Poland. Now she was able to help Jewish victims. At first, she witness the ghettoization: “Despite our horror, despite our inability to credit that anyone could conceive of and execute such a scheme, not one among us – even the greatest pessimists – would have dared for a moment to suspect that, by confining the Jews in tiny spaces and cutting them off from the world, the Germans were acting only by way of preparation” (p. 61-62). She immediately reached out, working closely with Jewish relief organizations, including Cracow’s welfare outfit headed by Dr. Michał Weichert.

“This man of outstanding intellectual and spiritual culture, but above all a great-hearted man of immense courage, achieved miracles in his terrible outpost. I had the privilege of being in contact with him a couple of months earlier and proposing that we cooperate in the prisoner field. Since then, the Jewish Committee had been supplying us regularly and punctually with foodstuffs with which we fed Jews in prison. I was grateful to our resistance Commander, too, for supporting the enterprise right from the start. The moment I asked him about it, he ordered everything possible to be done to help the Jews as well” (p. 99)

Everywhere she went, the Countess spotted Jewish persecution and reported it to the underground. In Volhynia, “The Jews... were being persecuted in a hitherto unheard of fashion, amounting quite simply to mass murder. One of them, a young intellectual, hid in my hosts’ home. This was the first time that I had directly encountered the wholesale extermination of Jews and heard of the bodies of wounded and unconscious victims, together with corpses, being thrown into mass graves.... It was just the same in the Ukraine, in Kiev itself and even worse in other towns” (p. 103). She even vainly endeavored to travel to Kiev to ease the lot of civilians, mostly Jews, in camps there.

When the Countess became a prisoner of the Nazis herself, she continued recording the suffering of others, for example the round-up of Jews in jail in Stanisławów and in Lwów (p. 139, 166), including rapes of Jewish women (“shrieks and wails from the women and children could be heard, laughter and wild bellowing from the SS. It went on till daybreak” p. 167). They were all mass murdered. Nonetheless, Lanckorońska also helped anywhere she could, for example assisting the gravely ill “Mrs. Rappaport” and sharing food with a Jewish student of classics in the Lwów jail (p. 160, 170). At Ravensbrück, the Jewish inmates came from a variety of countries, including Greece, France, Italy, Hungary, and Germany. They were of disparate social backgrounds and largely did not get along. The Countess was put in charge of them and, with the assistance of several educated Jewish women, she was able to organize them so as to help them avoid more persecution and death (p. 241-242, 262).

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It is her relationship with Germany that she found most troubling. She was brought up speaking German; she attended German schools. “I thought about German scholarship, to which I myself owed so much... And now these same Germans, by their very existence, were disgracing the humanity to which they belonged” (p. 200). In camp, she discovered that she had become prejudiced even against the German literature. “That obstacle was the German language. That same language in which I had formerly received so many cultural treasures had today become for me, as it were, contaminated. The experiences of recent years had dishonoured it. So strongly did I feel this aversion that it was no use trying to persuade myself that only I would suffer by restricting my cultural horizon. I did, of course, read a great deal, but without deriving any real spiritual benefit” (p. 192).

As for the German people, Lanckorońska found them utterly corrupted and loathsome. At best, they irritated her. “The Germans, moreover – of all nations possibly the most arrogant, but

the least proud – are infuriated by nothing so much as an innate pride, which they usually dismiss as impertinence, though it impresses them profoundly” (p. 263). The Countess was also shocked when she failed to find a single political prisoner in the camp section for the German youth. She expected underground heroes but discover sex offenders: “The girls, with obvious delight and almost always smiling, recounted their exploits, of which the one most frequently cited was incest” (p. 204). She finds vice rather resistance among the adults as well: “lesbianism... was indeed widespread among the German women in the camp” (p. 216). And the German prisoner-trustees were the most cruel of them all.

Lanckorońska failed even to be impressed with the German political prisoners she met in Berlin for they betrayed their country to the Soviets. “Hitlerism had so thoroughly erased from their consciences principles that to us would seem fundamental, that neither of these women could perceive anything wrong in their contacts with the enemy in time of war – something regarded for many thousands of years as a crime, indeed one of the gravest crimes a man can commit” (p. 187). The Countess also dismissed as inadequate those Germans who wanted to “salvage as much as possible, even at the risk of one’s life, but without drawing any final conclusions. I felt very strongly at the time that there really was no way out for a German. That mortal sin which every one of them had committed by permitting the authorities to perpetrate crime, and by succumbing to the tempter telling him that he belonged to a people superior to all others and promising world dominion – that was a sin that nothing could ever cleanse, not even high treason” (p. 188). The Countess anticipated that

“One day they will say they did not know, and that will be partially true. They do not know because they do not wish to know. They have a blind belief in a victory which they mean to exploit in every possible way and without restraint. For that reason, they would sooner not know by what means this victory is to be achieved. Here are the underlying causes of the German moral catastrophe. That is why the relationship of the post-war world to Germany must not be conditioned by feelings of revenge or hatred, nor must nationalism of any kind be allowed to play a role. The sole deciding factor must be the effective safeguarding of humanity against comparable cataclysms in future, in order to ensure that Christian civilization is not totally annihilated” (p. 200)

Nonetheless, she was not above praising an individual German here and there. Of her escort to Berlin, she says, “The Gestapo men behaved decently” (p. 181). She displayed some grudging appreciation for SS-Untersturmführer Walter Kutschmann who reported her *nemesis* Krüger to Berlin. But only one single German individual merits her wholesale admiration: Cardinal Clemens August Count von Galen – “precious proof that among that unhappy nation – submerged in crime – there were nevertheless some magnificent individuals,” resisting the Nazis (p. 294).

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Karolina Lanckorońska's Dantean experiences did not have a happy end. They could not because for her the personal was the public and vice versa. It became obvious to her that she lost already in Ravensbrück. It was the Germans who informed her that the Allies had sold Poland to Stalin at Yalta. The shock and humiliation compounded with a feeling of futility in the aristocrat's heart. This was a tragedy of Greek proportions:

“So it was that our fear for Poland's fate grew day by day. This apprehension was predominant in our hearts and souls, but other, equally natural, though more egoistical feelings were beginning to creep in. For every Polish woman imprisoned in Ravensbrück for serving the independence of her country and the ideal of human freedom, the personal sacrifice counted for nothing. It was something very unpleasant, but also very natural, that she should be here and possibly die here: it was quite usual, not very interesting or, at any rate, not all that important – *provided the aim was achieved*. Now, however, if Poland had

been sold out and the world's freedom trampled underfoot, the individual sacrifice made by each of us suddenly began to appear as something terrible, because pointless. Now, and only now, did our personal misery, and the memory of our sisters who had fallen in battle and died here, begin to weigh crushingly upon us" (p. 271).

The personal liberation, in April 1945, following numerous interventions from the Red Cross, was anti-climatic. "The tension of being in danger is itself a great source of strength. When that suddenly ceases, in respect of oneself but not the Cause, nothing is left but a painful sense of emptiness, followed by a humiliating depression" (p. 288). The Countess exclaims: "How fortunate was that Poland of the nineteenth century, in whose name nobody had the right to make lying speeches, and whose refugees, for the whole civilized world, came to symbolize man's struggle for freedom! Instead, we Poles had now become the 'enemies of peace' for refusing to play the leading role in a historic premiere in which, after winning the war, the victorious Allies bury one of their number" (p. 289). Thus, her personal tragedy continued to be merged with the public disaster. She realized that "I would... [be] a fugitive without a homeland. At the time, I could not have conceived of anything so monstrous" (p. 181). With the blessing of the United States and the United Kingdom, the Soviets appropriated "half of the Polish lands" and established "in the other a make-believe 'government'" (p. 288-289). That Communist regime soon baselessly accused the Countess "of having collaborated with the Germans" (p. 285).

But she never surrendered. In the 1960s, she testified at Krüger's trial. But the judge did not want to hear about the Lwów professors (p. 292). Earlier, in 1946, she wrote down her memoirs, combining them with her prison and camp notes. But Western publishers rejected them as "too anti-Soviet" or "too anti-German." It has taken nearly 60 years for the West to permit itself to listen to the simple truth that the Second World War was about a fight against two enemies: the Nazis and the Communists. And the Countess Karolina Lanckorońska finally had her say, a most eloquent one to boot.

UK edition: Karolina Lanckorońska, *Those Who Trespass Against Us: One Woman's War Against the Nazis* (London: Pimlico, 2005), with preface by Norman Davies.

US edition: Karolina Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War Against the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, Perseus Book Group, 2007), with preface by Eva Hoffman.

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