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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Father of Journalism

Reviewed by Rajiv Chandrasekaran

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS OFTEN haul around something that reminds them of home and serves as a talisman in chaotic places. Long before the days of iPods, a colleague at *The Washington Post* lugged a separate attaché case containing a phonograph and speakers so that, wherever he went, he could listen to opera while he wrote. A friend at *The New York Times* packs a Scrabble board in his bag. When I was reporting from overseas, I carried a bottle of wine from my native California. It was thoroughly impractical to do so as I trekked through Borneo or arrived in Pakistan, where my libations were smashed by customs inspectors, but my Napa Valley cabernet comforted me on long journeys.

Ryszard Kapuściński, the indomitable Polish correspondent and author who died in January at age 74, traveled the world with a copy of Herodotus's *Histories*, a grand and sprawling account of the first great war between East and West. Herodotus (484?–425? BC), the Greek historian who became known as the Father of History, wore out his shoe leather traveling throughout the Middle East to produce his account of the fifth-century BC conflict between the Greeks and the Persians.

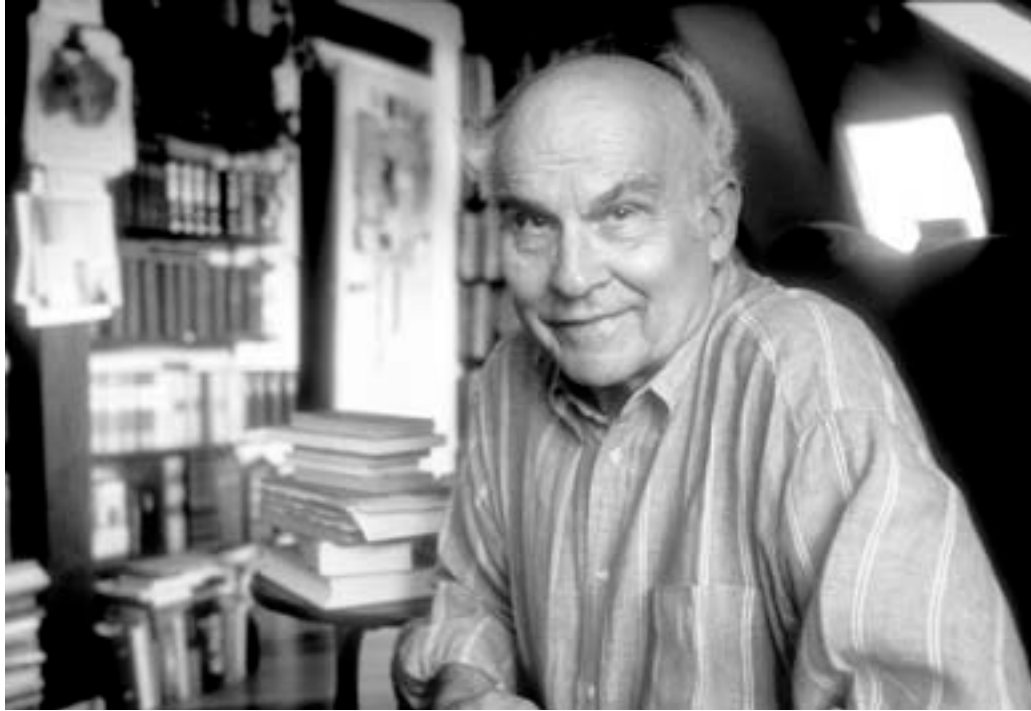
For Kapuściński, whose spare style and risk-defying reportage have been models for successive generations of correspondents,

the book was far more than a salve in the hinterlands. Herodotus became his muse, mentor, and faithful companion on journeys to Benares, Beijing, Tehran, and much of Africa. Kapuściński's final book, part memoir and part homage to his favorite historian, is replete with the subtle-yet-revealing insights that make Kapuściński's work so powerful. This time, however, his subject is not some colonial backwater, but his own life. Though Kapuściński was too self-effacing to write an outright autobiography, the story of his love for the *Histories* is very much a tale of Kapuściński himself.

Kapuściński did not have role models at home in Poland, or even in the insular world of foreign correspondents. He often traveled alone. "I was quite consciously trying to learn the art of reportage and Herodotus struck me as a valuable teacher," Kapuściński writes. "From the very outset," he says elsewhere, "the author of the *Histories* enters the stage as a visionary on a world scale, an imagination capable of encompassing planetary dimensions—in short, as the first globalist." In the

TRAVELS WITH HERODOTUS.

By Ryszard Kapuściński.
Knopf. 288 pp. \$25



Generations of foreign correspondents idolized Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) for defying death to report his spare, evocative stories.

same tradition, Kapuściński had the temerity to tell his newspaper editor at *The Banner of Youth* in 1955, when he was in his early twenties and Poles were still in Stalin's Gulags, that he wanted to travel abroad.

His first trips took him to India, where language was a barrier, and to China, where government minders kept him on a short leash. Yet on his later expeditions he struck off, not for Poland's more comfortable neighbors to the west, but instead for Africa and Latin America (the Polish Press Agency appointed him its only Third World correspondent in 1962). So as not to run afoul of his communist editors in Warsaw, he confined much of his early reporting to cultural and arts subjects, and the political stories he later wired from African countries were contextually distant enough that they didn't draw the attention of censors.

During a career that spanned four decades, Kapuściński probably traveled to more parts of the developing world than any other journalist of the 20th century. The biographical note on the flaps of his books might make the average reader cringe,

but it prompts a bit of envy among his fellow correspondents: Over the years, Kapuściński witnessed 27 coups and revolutions and was sentenced to death four times. "I was tempted to see what lay beyond, on the other side. . . . I wanted one thing only—the moment, the act, the simple fact of *crossing the border*," he writes in *Travels With Herodotus*. "The desire to *cross the border*, to look at what is beyond it, stirred in me."

Because he produced much of his best work when Poland was still behind the Iron Curtain, Kapuściński never achieved the acclaim of journalists such as George Orwell, David Halberstam, or David Remnick. But he was one of the very best at describing for his countrymen what lurked in foreign lands. And with the translation of several of his books into more than two dozen languages, he garnered admirers around the world. *The Emperor* (1978), an account of the decline and fall of Haile Selassie's authoritarian regime in Ethiopia, was his first book to appear in English, in 1983, and is perhaps his most famous. Others include *The Soccer War* (1978), about a six-day conflict that erupted

between Honduras and El Salvador over a soccer game; *Shah of Shahs* (1982), on the 1979 Iranian Revolution; and *Imperium* (1993), about the fall of the Soviet Union.

Though obsessed with the ancient history recounted in Herodotus's tales, Kapuściński doesn't dwell on history in his own work. *Another Day of Life* (1976), his marvelous account of Angola in the grip of civil war, explains little about the roots of the conflict, but through his encounters with ordinary people, his perceptive observations, and his casual chats with Marxist rebels, he reveals something about what it is to be human. As fleeing Portuguese colonists converge on the capital, Luanda, and prepare to leave the country, he writes, people can talk of nothing but the wooden shipping crates they are building to pack out their belongings, and "this dusty desert city nearly devoid of trees now smells like a flourishing forest." Pet dogs, once their owners abandon them in the emptying city, roam in great, pedigreed packs, scavenging for food.

Kapuściński was accused of at times embroidering what he had observed to build a better story—not wholesale fiction, but little embellishments here and there. It is not clear why he did so. Perhaps he was emulating his idol—some have called Herodotus the father of lies—in inventing details to flesh out the narrative and get at some larger truth. Or perhaps he worried that if he didn't produce vivid dispatches, he'd be relegated to the obituary desk in Warsaw. We cannot forget that he was a product of a different era, of a different system, when such liberties were not regarded as firing offenses.

His obsession with Herodotus, Kapuściński admits, sometimes proved a distraction. When he was covering a civil war in Congo, he found himself "infected with the contagion of war—not the local one, but another, distant in place and time." Later in the book, he continues: "As I immersed myself increasingly in Herodotus's book, I identified more and more, emotionally and cognitively, with the world and events that he recalls. I felt more deeply about the destruc-

tion of Athens than about the latest military coup in the Sudan, and the sinking of the Persian fleet struck me as more tragic than yet another mutiny of troops in Congo."

I would like to believe that Kapuściński was exaggerating. Here he sounds like a narrow-minded Eurocentrist, but it is impossible to read his books and come away convinced that he does not care about all that he experienced. He probably spent more days in Africa, and wrote more about the continent, than any of his European and American contemporaries. Yet his admission highlights his book's principal shortcoming: He fills pages with lengthy recapitulations of Herodotus's tales rather than concentrate on the fascinating story of his own journeys. I complain only because I opened *Travels With Herodotus* as his other admirers may, hoping for one full, final dose of his adventures. It is because that expectation wasn't entirely fulfilled that I am disappointed.

I wish that Kapuściński had been healthy enough to travel to Iraq before he died. I can only imagine the trenchant observations he would have delivered from Baghdad's Green Zone—the rumpled Polish reporter walking around, not bothering with geopolitics or military strategy, but vacuuming up the sorts of stories nobody else was. He would have spent a week with the Indians and Pakistanis hired by Halliburton to serve food in the cafeteria. He would have gotten into the cab with a truck driver from Texas and navigated the treacherous convoy routes.

In the years since Kapuściński's travels, many other books have been written about the places he visited. But few have had the staying power of his. Though this may not be his finest, it does not attenuate the power of his life's work. When young journalists ask me whom they should read, I'll continue to tell them to immerse themselves in Kapuściński. Now, however, I'll add: Read him as he read Herodotus.

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