

Q&A: Wojciech Jagielski

The Polish long-form master and Kapuscinski heir talks about children in war and the fate of journalism

By [David Samuels](#) | December 5, 2012 7:00 AM



A balding, middle-aged man with a wart on his nose, Wojciech Jagielski is one of the greatest of the rapidly shrinking category of reporters who combine narrative gifts with human insight and a tolerance for physical discomfort and danger. Unlike his better-known peers, like [John Burns](#)^[1] and [C.J. Chivers](#)^[2] of the *New York Times*, or [Jon Lee Anderson](#)^[3] of *The New Yorker*, Jagielski writes in Polish, a fact that has sadly limited the access of English-speaking readers to his work. If Jagielski wrote in English, more readers might be acquainted with his raw and heartbreaking reporting from the Caucasus during the break-up of the Soviet Union, his insanely good reporting from South Africa during Mandela's revolution, his prescient reporting from Afghanistan, or his reporting from Chechnya. They also might have read his interview in the summer of 2001 with Ahmad Shah Massoud, in which the Afghan leader warned that Osama Bin Laden was preparing a major strike against the United States.

Over the last decade, the species of foreign reporting in which Jagielski was mentored by his hero, the legendary Polish reporter and writer Ryszard Kapuscinski, has largely been replaced by cheap, high-speed opinion-mongering on the Internet. One of the few welcome results of this development is that *Towers of Stone*^[4], Jagielski's stunning account of the Chechen wars, and *The Night Wanderers*^[5], his book about the child soldiers of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, are now available in English translations from *Seven Stories Press*^[6]. Hopefully, Jagielski's account of the Afghan wars, based on his 11 trips to Afghanistan between 1992 and 2001, will also soon be translated into English.

I recently had the privilege of talking with Jagielski in a conference room on the 46th floor of the Empire State Building in New York, where we discussed the hazards of our trade and people we knew in common, and the fact that he is deathly afraid of heights. What follows are some excerpts from our conversation.

What was your first war? Was it the Caucasus?

First was Transcaucasia. It was 1989, and I was lucky because it was a gradual approach to the war. First I was sent to cover Georgia and Armenia, and there were the anti-Soviet demonstrations already, and the people were demanding autonomy or language rights. Or they didn't want some monuments. I was reporting year after year, and in 1990, 1991, there were the first riots on the street, first fights, first shots. Then I came back to Georgia one day, I remember, and they told me no, there is no one in town, because now there is a war. So, I went to see my people, and it was a very small war. Two, three shots. That's all. In 1992, it was another war. It went step by step, so I got used to the violence.

I excused myself also because at the time I was observing the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was in the Duma when Yeltsin made the comment that the Communist Party should be illegal. There were two guys on the scene, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Gorbachev was explaining that socialism is not that bad, we have to reform and the Communist party is not guilty for all these things. Yeltsin, who was a populist leader, answered, "No, the Communist party is bad and I will make it illegal immediately as the President of Russia." And Gorbachev says, "No, no, no. You cannot do this like this." Yeltsin said, "No. I will show you." And he starts looking for a pen, but he didn't have a pen and someone from the audience, some journalist, gave him this pen, and he signed the order that made the Communist party illegal. So, how can you even write about such things?

Talk to me about the psychological effects of the violence you witnessed on the societies you wrote about. Because the injury doesn't stop with the person who got shot. There is the person that did the shooting, the victim's family, the shooter's family, a child who saw it, the neighbors. An entire community is infected by violence. How do you talk to these people?

You are never prepared for the effects of violence, for some violent acts committed against you or your family. It is better if you are wounded than to have to observe when your son is killed, your wife is raped, your house is destroyed and then to figure out how to survive.

The most difficult thing for me was to talk with the refugees, the people who suffered. In the former Soviet Union, they looked at me as someone sent from a high power, and if they tell me their story, maybe someone will come and help them. And nothing would happen. And then, the next time I came there, they're still in the refugee camp and they look at me like, "What? I gave you everything. I give you my last thing, my story, and nothing happened and you made money on my misfortune."

I understand that for the soldiers and the rebels who are shooting, the violence must have some influence on their psychology also. But the people who suffer the most are the ones who observe this violence. You feel that you are so helpless. I think this is the worst thing that can happen to a human being. When your life is destroyed before your eyes, when they are burning your house without any particular reason, just because they want to burn your house. It's a big thing, but it's an also small thing.

I was stopped once by a soldier in Kenya, in 2000, when they had the civil war. They stopped me and they asked me for my passport, for some papers. I have everything clear and it was Kenya, not Somalia, not Congo. So, I was not that nervous. But he was starting to search me. And I knew that if he finds something in my pockets he just can take it. So, he took my cigarettes. I had almost a whole packet. He took 15 of them, left me 3 or 4 and he looked me in the eyes. He wanted to tell me, "I can do whatever I want. And you can do nothing."

Continue reading: Gaza, Afghanistan, Chechnya ^[7]

I was in Gaza and in the occupied territories of the West Bank at the height of the Palestinian suicide bombing campaign, and I was also in Gaza at different points when the civil conflict there was very intense. And when I tried to speak to Jews in America they would say, "Look at the Palestinians. First of all, they kill children with suicide bombers. Second of all, Hamas and all these groups are religious fanatics from the Middle Ages. They believe that when they blow themselves up they go to paradise. And in Israel, we have Arabs on the Supreme Court and everybody votes in national elections." And I'd say, "Yes, that's all true. But you should also try to imagine yourself as a Palestinian father in a village who has to live with checkpoints, with occupation, with 19-year-old soldiers who smack your son in the face and piss on your floor. And try living like that for 40 years. It's not suicide bombers or Iran, but it's also something terrible."

We do not understand that one of the worst things which is happening during war and all this violence is the humiliation of the victims. Someone can be humiliated when his house is burned, when his family is destroyed, and he's the only one who's left living just to suffer more.

But someone could be more humiliated, as you said, when some soldier enters his house without any permission and pisses on the floor.

For example, I am familiar with Afghanistan. I knew from the very beginning that in our classical way of war, you have to enter houses. You have to pacify villages. Because you have to hunt for the rebels. But once you go into someone's house with their women present, they just have nothing else to say to you. For them, it's a sacred place, and if you do this thing, no matter what nationality you are, they feel humiliated and you are their enemy.

In the '90s, when Afghanistan was a completely forgotten country, I was going every year. I came back to Afghanistan on my last trip before Sept. 11, it was in April or May 2001. I went there when they destroyed the Buddhist statues. But then I came back to talk with Massoud, and he told me about Osama, and I wrote a big story about Osama Bin Laden that was published in July. Massoud told me that, "You in the West, you underestimate Osama. He's targeting you and he will hurt you very badly." I knew it wasn't propaganda. It was published, and then Sept. 11 happened and then my newspaper realized that I was the only journalist in Poland who was covering Afghanistan on a permanent basis, and it was important to them.

It was the same with Chechnya. At first, the Chechens were the heroes because they were beating the Russians. And then the same Chechens started to kidnap Polish journalists; and whenever I was coming to Chechnya, I was paying the guys who were arming the child soldiers. All my security guys were 14-, 15-, 16-year-old guys. I was paying the money and they were buying Kalashnikovs for children.

Is that why you wrote the Uganda book?

Not only.

What you did was a very interesting psychological act, to say I'm going to have as my protagonist a child soldier who was a perpetrator of terrible violence, and I want you, the reader, to sit with this person for a while.

My first idea was to write about the child soldiers and the **Lord's Resistance Army**^[8]. I knew that Lord's Resistance Army was a strange guerrilla group, and a religious sect. I was in Uganda many times in the '90s. Whenever I was in Eastern Africa, I always wanted to go to Uganda because of the history of Idi Amin, and because of Kapuscinski. There was something in Uganda that he wanted to understand and that I wanted to understand.

In 2006 I went to Gulu for the research for the book. But when I met these first child soldiers in Gulu, I realized that it would be impossible for me to write the book I had imagined because of the lack of communication. Because, you know, as a grown-up, it's not very easy to communicate with children, even if they are your own children. In Uganda, it was also a language problem. I needed a translator and if you have a translator, it's not a conversation anymore. You cannot look for some trust in the person.

But the worst thing was, when I was introduced to some children, and I knew that, for example, this small kid I am talking with also killed many people. How can I talk with this guy? I was afraid and then I was also worried because I was not a psychologist. I was afraid that this conversation could harm them.

I mean, if I ask one of those guys “Can you tell me how many people you killed and is it 100?” What does that mean, 100 people? It’s difficult, even for me, as war correspondent, to imagine that you are the guy that killed 100 people. And this child is speaking 100 like he was telling me how many points he scored during the basketball match. So, for me it’s impossible to find a real understanding, which leads to writing something very different than a normal reported article.

We don’t have a category of visual art called nonpainting. So why nonfiction? What does it mean?

I think it’s an important question because you have so many journalists who started to write books and they still pretend that they are writing journalism. I’m talking about my own experience now. I am doing things that I would never allow myself to do in the journalist’s story for my newspaper. How can you say what President Obama thought? I think in Poland the problem started with Kapuscinski. I mean, how would you say what is the journalism of Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote—I am thinking now of *In Cold Blood*—and what is the literature, right?

Did Kapuscinski read your stuff?

I knew him for more than 20 years. When I was sent for my first trip to Transcaucasia, nobody told me, “You should call Kapuscinski.” But, you know, I was so proud. I was twenty-something and I’m going to Georgia and that’s my chance, so I will call Kapuscinski and I would tell him where I’m going. So, I called him and I asked him such a stupid question, “Do you have any telephone numbers?” He was there in the ’60s. I was going in the late ’80s. But still, he gave me some telephone numbers—and one actually worked.

Continue reading: Janusz Korczak ^[9]

[Later on] I knew that he was reading my stories. He was not a guy who would say, “Yes, great,” but he would call you and he would tell you that, “I read your story.” If he didn’t call, it meant that it was a very bad article.

It would be the saddest thing if we lose this history of our foreign reporting in Poland. For a journalist like Kapuscinski, it was one of the only ways even to write about our own country. In Poland he would be censored if he would write about the miners from the south or poor peasants from the northeast. He was writing about Ethiopia but we knew that he was writing about us.

This is one of the reasons that I decided to join a wire service again. I was fed up with the situation and saying OK, the media are bad, but I'm part of the media, but I'm not one of them. Working for the wires, it gives me the comfort of some pure thing.

You mentioned *In Cold Blood*, which is an interesting example, because you feel how so many aspects of Capote's psychology animate the book, which makes it very clearly a work of literature, even if every fact in the book is also true.

There is nothing on the first page that says its pure fiction or is based on true fact. It says, *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote. If I report as a journalist it's in a newspaper, and it is written according to the rules of a newspaper. If I write a book, it's a book, and I think there are different rules in a book. I don't create the characters out of thin air, but I would be naïve or cynical if I would say that all the dialogues are 100 percent true.

It's hard to verbalize that sometimes. What makes this poem a Sestina, and this poem a Haiku? Well, there are rules to the Haiku. If it has this many syllables, this many lines, then it's Haiku and it's not a Sestina. In practice, I select certain lines and descriptions from my notebooks and not others because they have a dramatic purpose in the story that has been taking shape in my mind as a result of my experiences. All of those things have a relationship to reality, right? And yet, who can define exactly what that relationship is? It's always my own subjective reality, which another person might have experienced very differently. One thing that makes it nonfiction and not fiction is that if you decide to sympathize with the villain of my piece, you can go meet with him yourself and try to prove that my story was wrong.

It's me, a journalist, who selects the personalities, the scenes, the drama. It's all done by me. The book should tell about Uganda, about the small children, their experience, my experience with them, my previous experience in Africa. That's what's important, not that Samuel was Samuel and Nora was Nora. You can forget about Samuel and Nora, but I hope that you remember the main idea of the book.

Listening to you, a Polish writer, talk about children and war, brings to mind for me the great Polish national hero **Janusz Korczak^[10], the Jewish educator and theorist who cared for the orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto. Did his example affect your own interest in the experience of children during wartime?**

Janusz Korczak was mentioned in my education not as a pioneering psychologist and a fighter for children rights, but as a father figure for the orphans who went with him to **Treblinka**^[11]. We didn't learn about his ideas. I was taught of the courage of Janusz Korczak who was not afraid to die with the children. But I wouldn't call it courage; it's the consequence of his choices and his clear ideas about how children should be brought up. There was nothing cynical in his life, nothing opportunistic. In Poland, in the Catholic faith, we have the saints. I think that

Janusz Korczak was a fantastic person who could be proclaimed a saint. He lived like he taught, which is very rare.

The percentage of the Jewish population of Poland that was wiped out during World War II was something like 96 percent. It was a terrible and unprecedented murder that was carried out by the Nazi killers with the approval, and even the participation, of some Poles. So, it is easy for Jews today to reduce the entire Jewish experience in Poland to one idea, which is that the Poles were terrible anti-Semites. But Polish Jews were also Poles. Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel prize-winning author, was a Jew who wrote in Yiddish, but he was also a Polish writer from Warsaw. There were thousands of Poles who were very happy when their Jewish neighbors were taken off to the Nazi gas chambers and who gladly helped the Nazis. But Poles also hid thousands of their Jewish neighbors while risking the certain deaths of their own families.

There's no such a thing as a society of heroes. The real relations are among neighbors. If I can live with my neighbor, whether he is black or a Jew, or a Russian, I will live with them. You need to remember about our own experience and our own history. For 200 years we didn't have our own state. There was no Poland. We were under occupation of Russia, Germany—and so on. We had only 20 years of independence before Second War started. Twenty years is nothing, it's a second. So, yes, there were also politicians who were talking about the "true Poles." And the people who are not true Poles, what does it mean? I don't know. Maybe I'm also not in the category of the true Pole.

The history is very complicated. I come from the northeast of Poland; I was brought up in small town at the border. You heard the name Jedwabne?

You grew up in Jedwabne?

It was very close. In my small town we have a shop when we were buying sport shoes, all these things. We called it Bognitzki. Bognitzki's a Polish name for synagogue—and that building used to be a synagogue. There were no Jews in my town when I was growing up, but it was the border between Germany and Poland. When Second War started, this part of Poland was taken by Russia, so the fronts were moving back and forth, and back and forth.

So, when I talk now with these people from my place, I ask them how they feel about what happened at Jedwabne after the war. It was a strange situation. Before the war, the government was Polish, the people who were living in the cities were the Jews, and the poor people in the villages were Poles. Everyone was envying the others. The Jews from the cities, they didn't want to have anything in common with the Polish villagers. The villagers were envying the Jews, and the government, well, they have to deal with this entire situation. The Poles were always suspicious that the Polish Jews were more Jewish than Poles, that they did not care about the Polish state. Then the Germans came, and they were against the Jews, and then the Soviet army came, and the Jews supported them. The enemies were becoming friends, the friends were

becoming enemies, and I know from all my trips and from all reportages that I wrote that nothing is simple.

Poland has a very rich and very tragic history, and everyone who lived in Poland shared some of this tragedy. I'm very sorry for all the people who suffered because of our history. But I'm strongly against accusing from this great distance, because it's too easy.

Continue reading: War correspondent ^[12]

The massacre of Polish Jews after the war in Jedwabne was perpetrated by other Poles. But both the Polish Jews and other Poles who lived in that area were horribly victimized by the Nazis.

Heroes happen, but there are very few of them, and the same is true of evil people. Yes, everybody treats Korczak like as a hero, but you also have Poles who acted badly. We will find Polish Jews who behaved like heroes and patriots, and we will also find Jews who were selling Poles to the Soviet army, or selling their fellow Jews to the Germans. I'm very thankful that this experience, this war reporting, it helps me to understand thousands of things also from my own history. Because the easiest path is simply to have a direction, go right, go left, green light, red light—it is not up to you to make choices. But these simple instructions are not the real world. So, now if something is happening, I try to find out why.

But what I observe about journalism today is that we are in the state of very deep crisis. And if we are in crisis, it doesn't mean that we will be cured. Maybe we will die.

The patient doesn't always recover.

For me, the journalistic approach to war really changed after Sept. 11 when the media realized that the live report from New York and having millions of people in front of the TV screens is a better business than any live show. Then in Afghanistan, you had hundreds of freelancers, half of them without any knowledge of where Afghanistan was or what had been going on there. On the other hand, the old newspapers do not have enough money to cover all these things properly, so they were grateful that they could find someone who thinks that he can do the journalist's job.

Sometimes I get the impression that journalism is not a profession anymore. It's a hobby. I mean, you and I can play soccer or football, but it doesn't mean we are professionals. They are not also professionals, but still, we call these people journalists.

The worst are the political opinion websites, and the people who comment on those websites. I read that crap and I wonder why I should bother to go anywhere and report anything, when everyone already knows exactly what Afghanistan is like, and what we should do there—which always magically comes down to a question of which American political party is right.

Yes, in Poland we have the exact same phenomenon. Something happened in Nigeria, you have the comments—the liberals say, “Yes, this is because of the bloody colonialism. Black Africa’s suffering!” The rightists say, “Look at these bloody Africans. They cannot do nothing. You need to send them another colonialist government and start to teach them.” So, with all this noise there’s no space for any explanation by a journalist who knows anything about Nigeria.

When I began my journalistic career in the early ’90s, there was no Internet, no mobile phones. My main role was to make the selection among all this rubbish, this mountain or river of information to say that this is important, and this is bullshit. Of course, it was my selection and it was hardly objective, but it was professional. And I think still that you need such an intermediary.

The last offer that I got from my newspaper was to go to Libya for one week. I refused because one week is a meaningless amount of time, and Libya was never my area of interest. In my newspaper, I was writing about Africa, former Soviet Union, and part of south Asia. I mean, you wouldn’t call it a specialization. It’s half the world. But now, they do not need such a specialist. You covered one war and it is enough to send you to all possible wars in the world as a war correspondent.

But on the other hand, I am a privileged one because I was there in the ’90s, which was the golden era of journalists in Poland. We had money for everything and interest in everything. My editors in chief were going for a visit to New York, they were coming back to the newsroom and they wanted everything. “Jagielski, you are here, why you are not there?” So, I traveled and traveled and traveled.

Now there’s no space for my kind of journalism. On one hand, I am happy because I am writing the books, but on this other hand, it also proves that we as journalists are failing these readers who want to read long feature stories. Maybe our editors were not right when they were telling us journalists that the readers want short stories, they cannot focus on the long stories, they want pictures and highlights, and that’s all.

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