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How It Felt to Be There

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Ryszard Kapuściński: A Life by Artur Domosławski, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones
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In a few weeks, all going well, I will get to see my Polish file. Any foreign journalist who visited Poland regularly in the Communist period must assume that the old Security Service built up a dossier on him or her. Mine is now in the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, and I can read it. I don't know what it contains. Much irrelevant rubbish, no doubt: surveillance teams have to justify their expenses. But one thing I am prepared for: reports to the secret police by people I considered to be friends or at least friendly acquaintances. Some 'targets' find the idea of such reports so horrible and distressing they prefer not to see their file at all. My view is different.

'People's Poland' was the land Ryszard Kapuściński lived in, but left as often as he could. Many men and women there who despised the regime made bargains with themselves: if the price of getting a passport to a conference in Paris, or of befriending a Western foreigner, was to visit a certain Major Kowalski now and then and invent some harmless platitudes – cheap at that price. A few of my friends admitted this and joked about it. Others kept it delicately unsaid. They were reluctant informers, not professional spooks out to entrap me, and knowing that, I trusted them.

I thought Kapuściński was in that sort of league. We met quite a few times, mostly in Warsaw, and I felt that we were friends. Perhaps I was wrong. He was charming, intent, always apparently interested in what you had to say. And yet, as Artur Domosławski observes in this biography, that warm, complicit smile was for everyone. I can't remember much of what he said. This is because he never said much. He was one of those rare journalists whose way of listening makes other people open up and talk. That's what this elusive man used his smile for. That, and to take attention and curiosity away from himself. Kapuściński was evasive, and it turns out he had plenty to evade.

I first heard of him from Western journalists covering Africa. They liked him. He was exotic –

from behind the Curtain – but gutsy and funny. Working for PAP, the Polish news agency, he was permanently broke, but the hack mob adopted him, pushing him on board their chartered planes or blagging him past border officials startled by a Polish passport. A Commie? A few Americans watched their tongues when he was around. The rest, if they thought about it, imagined 'Richard' probably had to sign some nasty piece of paper in order to get out of Poland: so bloody what?

After reading Domosławski's compelling, exhaustive and often upsetting book, their easy tolerance – like mine – begins to look different. In the first place, it was patronising. Were all Poles so cynically light-hearted? Looking back, more than twenty years after the system fell apart, it seems more likely that my friends' contacts with the 'Services' were often humiliating and occasionally terrifying, in ways they preferred not to admit. Second, it turns out that 'paying a price' was not the case with Kapuściński. True, if he had not agreed to do intelligence work on the side, he would not have been allowed to travel abroad; there would be no *The Emperor*, no *Shah of Shahs* or *The Soccer War*. But in fact he was a willing collaborator. His intelligence file, opened after his death in 2007, showed that he contributed almost nothing of value, constantly pleading that he was too busy reporting to spy. But in Latin America, for example, he provided several profiles and details of figures thought to be working for the CIA. He did this because at that point in his life – the late 1960s – he was still a damaged but loyal member of the Communist Party. He was aware that Polish Communism was turning into a corrupt shambles, but he still believed – passionately, and romantically – that there was a world-struggle going on between imperialism and the working people of the poor southern continents. There was no middle ground. To miss a chance to strike against the oppressors was to take their side.

His file does not apparently show that he informed on friends or colleagues. There's one case in which he passed on a conversation with a Polish exile, a woman who had just been forced out of the country by the anti-semitic purges of 1968. Even this is ambiguous: she may have meant him to pass on her scathing comments about several Party figures, and he may even have agreed with her. But Domosławski is right to feel that Kapuściński was violating the moral and professional border of journalism. It's precisely because journalism and espionage have a superficial resemblance that they don't mix. Telling an ambassador what you have seen or heard can be harmless: writing target profiles for an intelligence service is another thing altogether, and it poisons a journalist's soul.

Domosławski's book came out in Poland in 2010, instantly creating an uproar. Domosławski was a young journalist who, like most of his colleagues, had for years adored Kapuściński as a great writer and reporter. He became – or made himself – something of a favourite disciple, constantly visiting the maestro at home or interviewing him for different media, and there's an element of possessiveness about his display of intimacy which makes it possible to sympathise with Kapuściński's widow, who unsuccessfully tried to block the book's

publication. It's fortunate that she failed. Domosławski's book is a poignant feat of biography, not only because he trekked all over the world on Kapuściński's trail, but because it reopens dilemmas of integrity and conscience that are still painful for any journalist who tried to report the big world in the late 20th century.

There are two large question marks over Kapuściński. The first is about his writing. Did he make things up? Did he manufacture quotes, say he had been to places when he hadn't, describe scenes that never happened? If so, did he tell lies in his routine reporting, as an agency man for the Polish Press Agency and Polish newspapers? Or did he reserve for his famous books a style of 'literary reportage' in which embroidery and even manipulation of the facts were skilfully used to create a reality 'truer than the truth'? The second question mark is about his politics: what he did and said when he was young, and how he covered it up later. But here it's important to note a difference in the emphasis given to those two question marks. For foreigners, especially Anglo-Saxon ones, the real Kapuściński problem is veracity. How should we read books like *The Emperor* (based, according to him, on interviews with Haile Selassie's courtiers after his empire had been overthrown) now that it seems unlikely that those interviews took place as he described them?

To Domosławski, as a young Polish journalist writing after a decade of horrifying slander, of barrages about who did what in the Communist past, Kapuściński's politics matter more. As a teenager growing up in a country unwillingly battered into the shape of a Soviet satellite, he became a fanatical boy Stalinist. A leader in the ZMP youth movement, bullying everyone to vote in dummy elections and writing dire poems to Uncle Joe, he was one of the young Red activists loathed by most Poles under the nickname of *pryszczaty* – 'the pimply ones'. In later years, Kapuściński blanked out that period, pretending that he only became political in 1956, the year Poland broke with Stalinism. How much had he known about the terror and repression in the early 1950s? After all, the fathers of several of his classmates had been in prison, and a girl he knew well was jailed for telling a joke. Come to that, how did this ardent worshipper of the Soviet Union contrive to overlook the realities of the Gulag and the purges, given that almost every Pole knew somebody who had been deported for slave labour after the Soviet invasion in 1939, or shot in the mass murder of Poland's elite at Katyń? Afterwards, he professed ignorance, but as a friend of his told Domosławski, 'he'd have had to be a moron not to know.'

And he was anything but a moron. Politically, he was very alert. The 1956 'Polish October' convinced him that in spite of terrible 'distortions' the Party was reformable, and that a more open, tolerant form of socialism might emerge. Like some of his colleagues he began to write dazzling exposure journalism about abuses in Poland ('the Polish school of reportage'), but it was in liberation movements in Africa and Asia that he claimed to have rediscovered the pure, revolutionary fire that Poland and the Soviet empire had failed to keep alight. And to make sure that he would always be granted a passport to return abroad, he kept on good

terms with powerful friends in the Party apparatus. A bonus for being overseas was that he missed many internal crises in Poland and didn't have to risk taking a stand. When pressure built up against the magazine *Polityka*, he quietly stopped writing for it – although its editors had published and encouraged him for years. When his main Party protector, the slimy Ryszard Frelek, pressed for the purging of 'Judeo-Stalinists' from the universities, he said nothing.

By the time of the Solidarity revolution in 1980, however, he had lost hope in the regime. He was gloomily sure that Russian tanks would soon arrive, but let himself be swept along by the tide of emotion and even – with unexpected rashness – handed back his Party card. After 1989, when Polish Communism abdicated, he briefly surfed on the general wave of enthusiasm for free markets but soon returned to a left-wing critique of globalisation and the winner-loser societies created by neoliberalism. His political zigzags were not unusual. In the 1960s and 1970s, much of the opposition to post-Stalinist regimes in Poland and Czechoslovakia was led by men and women who had been rabid activists for Stalinism in their youth but came to feel that their Marxist ideals had been betrayed. Kapuściński was different only in his reluctance to risk a breach with Party patronage (no more passports for Africa or Latin America), and in the anguished way he tried to conceal his early past.

In the last decades of his life he was clearly terrified that the file on his collaboration with Polish intelligence would come to light, which may help to explain one of his most blatant fiddles with history. When *Shah of Shahs* came to be translated into English in 1985, 15 pages of the original text – pages describing the fateful CIA plot to depose Muhammad Mossadegh – were missing. Although Kapuściński later hinted that the American publishers had demanded the cut, they stoutly deny making any such suggestion, and after a long inquiry, Domosławski believes the Americans. He concludes that Kapuściński had lapsed into paranoid, 'East European' logic. Suspecting that the CIA already knew about his covert role with intelligence, Kapuściński feared that were he to expose their dirty work in Iran back in 1953, the agency would retaliate by exposing him as a 'Communist spy'. And his new and huge success in the West with *The Emperor* would immediately turn to ashes.

Domosławski lists many other veracity problems. Kapuściński's agency stuff is fairly straightforward reporting, salted only with analysis and opinion. It's in his long feature articles, and in the anecdotes he tells in his books, that he habitually exaggerated, often changing details for effect. It seems to be untrue, for instance, that he was awaiting execution by Belgian mercenaries at the Usumbura airfield; other journalists tracked down by Domosławski say nothing of the sort happened. When Kapuściński told him he was in Mexico City for the massacre in 1968 or in Santiago for the Pinochet coup in 1973, the truth was he was in Mexico 'a month later' and in Chile a couple of years earlier. In Bolivia, he wrote a scandalous, colourful but quite untrue story about a rebel editor; he could easily have checked it with the man himself but – he isn't the only journalist to do this – didn't want facts to get in

the way of a great story. When a friend pointed out that a Tanzanian riot he described had happened in a different place in a different way, Kapuściński shouted at her: 'You don't understand a thing! I'm not writing so the details add up: the point is the essence of the matter!' And sometimes this works. In Amin's Uganda, he described the horror among a group of Africans who had caught a gigantic fish, swollen to monstrous size by devouring the corpses thrown into Lake Victoria. Kapuściński knew this wasn't true: the fish was an introduced Nile perch bloated by eating the native species. And yet the story captures exactly the terrified atmosphere of those nightmare times. Again, well-founded doubts about whether he really did interview all those Ethiopian courtiers in *The Emperor*, and whether they really spoke to him in that melancholy, philosophical way, don't prevent that book from being a revelatory account of the way a 'medieval' court felt and functioned.

Literature or journalism? Or 'literary reportage'? The 'English-language' tradition holds that selling readers fiction dressed up as fact is always wrong. But the old Central European tradition, where Kapuściński had many predecessors, including the mighty 'globe-trotting reporter' Egon Erwin Kisch, assumes that what readers want is entertainment and enchantment as much as information. To play around with the reality in order to convey more vividly 'what it was like to be there' was just fine for readers in Prague or Vienna. Even today, I would guess that Kapuściński's fellow Poles are much more intrigued by his political record than by his juggling with fact. Rereading Domosławski's first pages, I have the impression that he originally took the same line. It was only when he noticed that 'foreign' readers, especially Anglo-Saxons, were already agonising about Kapuściński's suspected 'inventions and exaggerations' that he decided to investigate.

All journalists – not just Kapuściński, and not just those from undemocratic countries – are sometimes tempted to embroider, to hype the significant details a little, to sharpen up the quotes by dropping the boring bits. Ethical frontiers in journalism are ill-lit and murky, but there's no doubt that Kapuściński – writing for publications and readers who had no way to check what he told them – overstepped them in the sense of selling 'faction' as fact. And he could also suppress for political reasons. In 1975, he seems to have discovered before anyone else that the Cubans were starting to put troops into Angola during the civil war – a huge story. But it would have harmed 'the cause' to break the news, so he sat on it until it became 'official'. That sort of decision isn't unique or 'leftist': in the 1990s, foreign reporters in Sarajevo during the siege (pro-Bosnian almost to a man and woman) found out how weapons and ammunition were still getting into the city. They agreed among themselves not to use the story. Self-censorship – or 'engaged journalism'? Kapuściński was passionately engaged, and even used a gun in the Angola fighting when he was with the MPLA revolutionaries. (To be fair, he claimed it was in self-defence.) 'I do not believe in impartial journalism,' he once wrote. 'I do not believe in formal objectivity. A journalist cannot be an indifferent witness, he should have the capacity for ... empathy. So-called objective journalism is impossible in

conflict situations. Attempts at objectivity in such situations lead to disinformation.'

Kapuściński's 'empathy', the talent for which he was admired and, to be frank, about which he was vain, was his habit of going to the back streets or the refugee encampment and 'listening' to ordinary people. He liked being well away from press minders, hard to find, roughing it with the locals. It made for fascinating journalism. But he had a weakness for exotic stereotypes which distorted the 'actually existing' Africa and Latin America he encountered. John Ryle, an anthropologist and writer who knows as much about eastern Africa as anyone in Britain, has been brutal about him: 'Despite Kapuściński's vigorously anti-colonialist stance, his writing about Africa is a variety of latter-day literary colonialism, a kind of gonzo Orientalism ... Here facts are no longer sacred; we are at play in the bush of ghosts, free to opine and to generalise about "Africa" and "the African".' Domosławski supports Ryle's verdict with some absurd pronouncements from *The Shadow of the Sun*: 'the kind of history known in Europe as scholarly and objective can never arise here, because the African past has no documents or records ... history ... achieves here its purest, crystalline form – that of myth.' It's almost sixty years since the great anthropologist Meyer Fortes told me that 'Africa has no history!', and even then, as a student, I knew it was condescending nonsense.

Kapuściński used to argue that coming from Second World Poland, with its long history of national subjugation, colonisation by foreign powers and heroic insurrections, he had a special insight into Third World countries that Western visitors could not match. That's doubtful. He certainly identified easily with national liberation movements. Sometimes he would say that rural poverty and ignorance in Pińsk, the town, now in Belarus, where his family lived, was almost African. But being Polish didn't noticeably help him to understand Africa. Just the contrary: his African experiences threw a lurid light on what was going on in Poland, and he used the parallels mercilessly in articles and books.

It's well known now that when he set out to write his trilogy on tyrants – *The Emperor*, *Shah of Shahs* and *Amin* (which he never finished) – he was evading the censorship to produce satirical allegories about the regime of Edward Gierek, who had taken over the leadership of Poland in December 1970. The broad theme was the futility of all attempts at economic 'development' without political reform. But Domosławski's book shows that the allusions were often much more precise. *The Emperor* began as a serial in the journal *Kultura*, and soon every smart Pole was reading the instalments to gloat over the jeers at Gierek dressed up as mockery of Haile Selassie's ambitions: 'His Majesty never made appointments on the basis of a person's talent, but always and exclusively on the basis of loyalty.' Writing that young Ethiopians go abroad and return 'full of devious ideas, disloyal views', so that they look around, clutch their heads and say 'Good God, how can anything like this exist?' Kapuściński enchanted his readers. Sometimes he simply invented: when Gierek proposed a monstrous barrage for the river Vistula, it turned out that Haile Selassie had announced dams on the Nile: 'How can we erect dams, the confused advisers grumble, when the provinces are

starving, the nation is restless?'

The fact that Kapuściński could get away with all this, becoming a literary hero in his own country, shows that Gierek's Poland was a relatively tolerant place – unless you were a striking worker. In his spells at home, he enjoyed a life of pleasure, rather than luxury. Fatally attractive to women (that intimate smile, that aura of fascinated attention), he went through a long pattern of short affairs: three months of enthusiastic worship followed by demotion to friendship. There was one long-term mistress, whom Domosławski interviewed on condition that he didn't name her, and there was Alicja, his long-suffering wife. They had married young, in 1952. Their one child, Zojka, was named after a Soviet partisan martyr and left Poland as soon as she could. Alicja put up with the affairs and the lengthy absences, and gradually let herself be manoeuvred into becoming the indispensable backstop to the great man's life; it was said that when his car broke down in Warsaw traffic, he would phone Alicja rather than try to repair it himself. Luckily, she had another life as a respected paediatrician at a Warsaw hospital.

Domosławski has written a book which is three sorts of cautionary tale: about journalism engaged or disengaged, about the political maze through which intelligent Poles made their way in the later 20th century, about the endless capacity of human beings to believe their own fictions and keep secrets from themselves. He ends up still confident about Kapuściński's stature as a writer, still attracted to the memory of him as a friend, but amazed at what he has found out. As one of Kapuściński's former lovers said, 'he was a complex man living in tangled times, in several eras, in various worlds.'

No moral giant, then. But after reading this biography, it's wise to go back to the books. Especially the works about Africa, at war or in poverty. Picking *Another Day of Life*, which I had read before, I was unable to put it down until I had finished this marvellously written, sensitive and observant journal of an African war. Ryle is right about the 'gonzo Orientalism' in some of what Kapuściński wrote, when he started generalising. He probably did embroider and reposition details about the fighting in Angola. But, as a reporter on one of those wars, I can say that he caught 'how it felt to be there' as nobody else could. And it was Kapuściński, typically, who noticed something too seemingly insignificant for anyone else to notice but which has changed African life: the plastic water container. Kapuściński lists the consequences of its arrival. The plastic container was cheaper than the old clay or metal pots. It was lighter, easier to carry over the miles between the hut and the well. Being lighter, it could be carried by children: before water had almost always been carried by women – now flocks of children walked to the spring or the well, while women were freed to make other choices for their day. Lastly, the containers could be left to stand in the long water queues in villages where water came by truck. Unlike the clay pots, they were too cheap to be stolen. 'Now ... you place your plastic container in the line and then go find yourself some shade, or go to the market, or visit friends.' Kapuściński wasn't at his best with emperors, tyrants or

Central Committee secretaries. With plastic water containers and tall women in the sun and dust, he did what journalism is supposed to do, but did it better.

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