

Ryszard Kapuscinski: from Poland to the world

By Neal Ascherson,
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The death of Ryszard Kapuściński on 23 January 2007 [1] in Warsaw shocked friends, colleagues and readers all over the world. He was 74, but somehow we had all assumed that this small rugged man with the sly smile was indestructible. He had survived so much. The Soviet and then Nazi occupation of his homeland, twenty-seven (or was it twenty-eight?) revolutions and coups all over the world, escape from at least four executions and an near-lethal attack of cerebral malaria in Tanzania, even the smoke, alcohol and stress of a Polish journalist's life - none of these seemed to affect him. He grew a little quieter, as if intimidated by his own fame, but that was all.

Kapuściński was a rare writer in several ways. In the first place, he was a writer who became a news-agency journalist [2] and yet preserved his literary talent intact, producing subtle and bewitching books after a lifetime of leg-work. He managed to keep his writer's third eye open while wrestling with the agency reporter's desperate daily and nightly struggle; the battle against updates and call-backs, telex machines which break down, and locked cable offices to which nobody has the key. He could do the curt style of press-agency cables, fact-based and frill-free, and yet his imagination stayed switched on, recording for future use significant details, ironies, characters, unexpected resemblances.

Neal Ascherson is a journalist and writer. He was for many years a foreign correspondent for the (London) *Observer*. Among his books are *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (1963; Granta, 1999 [3]), *The Struggles for Poland* (Random House, 1988 [4]), *Black Sea* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996 [5]), and *Stone Voices: the Search for Scotland* (Granta, 2003 [6])

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From reporting to parable

But he was also the last practitioner of an old genre of writing: the literary globetrotter [7]. He was writing books and long feature pieces for readers in communist Poland, where foreign travel was the rarest of privileges. But generations before the Iron Curtain descended, the public of European countries whose culture was continental and often landlocked, rather than colonial and oceanic, were avid for exotic tales from strange places overseas. Some of these readers lived in provinces of the Habsburg empire; others - like Poland - had lost their independence and their direct channel to outside experience; others again, especially imperial Germany, were latecomers to the colonial scramble and hungry for tropical anecdotes.

A throng of talented writers from central and eastern Europe took ship to provide their readers with the palm trees, crocodiles and cannibals they yearned for. The old colonial powers, Britain, France and the Netherlands in particular, had been feeding their publics with this sort of popular literature for generations. But now Karl May [8] offered Germany noble savages, while Egon Erwin Kisch [9] fed Czech and Austrian readers with dazzling reportage from distant continents.

The fifty years of communist rule returned most of central and eastern Europe to a bleak isolation in which the adventures of the globetrotter - tailored by the censor - fed imaginations starving for travel and colour. Poland was a relatively tolerant province of the Soviet empire, and Ryszard Kapuściński was only the most gifted [10] of a dozen writers and reporters licensed to roam the world and offer Poles at least a whiff of the great world outside. He became famous in his own country, long before his Ethiopian book *The Emperor* was published in English in 1983 and gave him an international reputation.

The Emperor, based on interviews with courtiers of the fallen Haile Selassie, rescued for posterity an almost forgotten and yet historically decisive institution: a royal court with all its customs, its meaningful routines and ceremonies, and its subtle attitudes to power and influence. Kapuściński had already reported the Ethiopian military putsch of 1974 for his employers, the Polish Press Agency (PAP [11]), and knew his way around Addis Ababa. But as well as a reporter and chronicler, he was also a writer of political parables.

Home truths from abroad

The book about Haile Selassie and his court, and the history of the last days of that empire, was published in Poland in 1978. The idea for an instant book came from his publisher, and at first

Kapuściński was reluctant. One African putsch was much like another: what could he write that was new? But then two things happened. The first was a typical writer's epiphany, a significant detail. He remembered a tiny dog which had nestled on Haile Selassie's lap, and the words of a palace servant: "It was a little Japanese miniature dog, and its name was Lulu". Kapuściński recalled: "When I had that absolutely simplest of sentences, I knew I had a book!"

The second impulse was more gradual. Writing about the futile "development" plans of the emperor in his final years, Kapuściński was increasingly reminded of what was happening in his own country. There matured in his head the idea of a trilogy, three works about rulers who had fancied that they could substitute economic progress for democracy. *The Emperor* was the first. Kapuściński wrote the second book - *Shah of Shahs* - a few years later. There was to be a third book, this time about Idi Amin and Uganda, but Kapuściński never finished it.

His plan, pretty transparent at the time, was to debunk the regime of Edward Gierek [12] in Poland in a way which would get past the censors. Gierek had come to power in 1970 and, after a brief honeymoon with relatively free expression, launched a programme for transforming the Polish economy and the life of Polish consumers which - he hoped - would render demands for democratic liberties irrelevant. As with Haile Selassie and the Shah of Iran, this project ended in catastrophe and social explosion: strikes, police repression, the collapse of the economy under foreign debts and finally the Solidarity revolution [12] of 1980.

As for the Idi Amin book, it would seem that Kapuściński lost interest when it became clear, in the late 1980s, that the whole communist episode was coming to an ignominious close. His own explanation was that *perestroika* broke out next door in the Soviet Union while he was labouring over the manuscript, and there were suddenly more urgent and important things to report and analyse than the activities of an African dictator.

He wrote studies of mighty leaders, but his reporting was founded on talking to the poor and the anonymous. He saw so much failure and tragedy, and yet he remained [13] an optimist. Kapuściński, like many young men in post-war Poland, began as an idealistic communist, soon to be disillusioned by the period of extreme Stalinism in the early 1950s. He was still trusted by the regime, who thought him suitable for the infinitely coveted job of a foreign correspondent, but his experience of the outside world completed his alienation and in 1980 he was a convinced supporter of Solidarity.

In that summer of rebellion, a cryptic remark of his went around: "At last, Poland is learning from its experience rather than from its mistakes". At the time, I thought that this was an empty observation - not least because so much of recent Polish experience had consisted of mistakes. Later, I came to see that he was talking about authenticity in politics, and suggesting that Soviet-style communism could never have sent down lasting roots into Polish society.

There is a revealing passage near the end of *Shah of Shahs*, in which he describes the Shah's "Great Civilisation" as a rejected implant. "The rejection ... once it begins, the process is irreversible. All it takes is for society to accept the conviction that the imposed form of society does more harm than good. Soon the discontent becomes manifest ... there will be no peace until the imposed, alien body is purged ... And yet there were noble intentions and lofty ideals behind the Great Civilisation. But people saw them only as caricatures." That was Ryszard Kapuściński's verdict on the 20th century, and on the 21st as well. The great totalitarian creeds have passed away, but the forcible implanting of alien social forms still happens all around us.

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http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-journalismwar/kapuscinski_4286.jsp

Links:

- [1] http://www.poland.pl/news/article,Kapu%C5%9Bci%C5%84ski_dies_in_Warsaw,id,255676.htm
- [2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?view=DETAILS&grid=&xml=/news/2007/01/25/db2502.xml>
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