

Polesia Czar and a childhood landscape

Zbigniew Benedyktowicz: We are to talk about memory and its significance in contemporaneity as well as its assorted forms and manners of appearance. Let us, however, start with your private and most intimate “memory place”, the very onset of your biography. You must have been asked often about the Polesie region and the town of Pińsk – your birthplace and the land of your childhood...

Ryszard Kapuściński: I am constantly requested to comment about all sorts of things and endlessly about Polesie. This is also a moral problem, because I am the only living writer born in Pińsk. At the moment, I thus live as if under social pressure and feel some sort of a moral obligation. We know very well that everyone is writing about Wilno and Lwów, and that Polesie and Pińsk are situated exactly halfway between those two. Polesie is a somewhat poor and abandoned land and little has been written about it.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Do you frequently compare that, which you remember as a child and that, which you encounter now? Do such confrontations reveal something permanent?

R. Kapuściński: I often travel there whenever I am capable of doing so and have the time. Here stands the house in which I was born and here lies the cemetery with the graves of those closest to me, members of my family. My grandmother and cousins were buried



Street and family home of Ryszard Kapuściński in Pińsk

RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI

On Memory and Its Threats - Ryszard Kapuściński

Talks with Zbigniew Benedyktowicz and Dariusz Czaja

here. My parents were elementary school teachers in Pińsk and up to this day some of the locals remember them. I am even an honorary member of the Polish Circle in Belarus. Finally, some of the old streets have survived.

Z. Benedyktowicz: What about the landscape and Nature?

R. Kapuściński: Polesie was an extremely exotic part of Europe, a land of sprawling marshes with only a single road from Brześć (Brest) to Pińsk built of paving stones; the rest was composed of bogs or dunes. It was simply impossible to reach certain villages, accessible only by boat or, in the winter, by sleigh. Communication was maintained with boats. That world no longer exists. During the Soviet era the marshes were drained and turned into deserts. Paradoxically, part of Polesie survived thanks to the Red Army, which set up training areas; consequently, it was forbidden to do or change anything. This part of Polesie preserved its original form. On the other hand, people of the past are no longer, or only a very small number has survived. The policy pursued during the Soviet period consisted of a “Russification” of the area close to the border. Russians arrived from further inland and, consequently, the character of the whole region underwent great transformations. The Borderlands still feature much of their allure. This is a magnificent theme, since the Borderlands character remains, predominantly within the inhabitants. People of the Borderlands stick together and Polesie circles are active in Gdańsk and Wrocław. In the various parts of the world that I visited I always met Poleszczuki – former residents of Polesie, who came to see me and wanted to talk about the past and show photographs. In New York or London someone would appear and pointing to a photo say: “Look. Here’s your Mum”. Sometimes, they brought photographs taken in their schooldays ...

Z. Benedyktowicz: This is interesting in view of the fact that sociological studies or publicistics stress predominantly the threat of globalisation. Your exam-



In Polesie...



In New York... New York 1984. Photo: Andrzej Strumiłło

ple shows how assorted local peripheral cultures successfully function alongside this process ...

R. Kapuściński: Yes, this is an extremely strong phenomenon. I believe that it is the reverse of globalisation. It is the latter menace that sets free a feeling of distinctness, a certain need for identity and belonging to some sort of a local community. Those bonds are extremely powerful. It is because I come from Pińsk that people bring to those meetings assorted photographs and items that they took from there. These durable relations contain a certain emotional load. The people in question are extremely proud of the fact that they are the carriers of memory and willingly gather to reminisce.

By way of example, I say: "Alright, would you like to write all this down and then mail it to me, because I

shall be leaving soon?" And that person sits down and describes everything. The recollections are at times extraordinary, as in the case of a 90 years-old lady who now lives near Wrocław. I also possess an enormous collection of photographs. It was even suggested to organise a large-scale exhibition of my photographs of Pińsk. This memory about a world of the past is really very much alive. Travelling across the world I appreciate the power of the feeling of identity and attachment to one's birthplace, that small homeland. Despite enormous and growing emigration people leaving their native land take those feelings with them and thus cherish the strongest possible connection with the "small homeland". This awareness of identity linked with a concrete place is man's great need. It is the reason why Africa is so fascinating as a continent that has preserved tribal awareness in a most visible, palpable, and experienced form. This is not the consciousness of a "generalised" person, but regional, local awareness. Apparently, there is no such thing as an awareness of the homeland – the homeland is a fluid concept in the history of societies, a rather artificial product of our mentality; it is tribal awareness that is the strongest in man.

Z. Benedyktowicz: What if we were to try to establish at this exact moment that what has been preserved in your memory first and foremost?

R. Kapuściński: What do I remember? It seems to me that we are dealing here with a much wider problem. My thesis about memory is as follows - ask: when does man come into being? Not biologically, but when does he start existing as a human being? In my opinion, he emerges with the very first reminiscence that can be reached. We thus search while saying: "I remember this, and this, and one more thing", and in this way we arrive at the very first recollection when we no longer remember anything that occurred earlier. It is exactly at that point that man begins and "I" emerges, that my identity and my extremely individual, private life story start. I am in the habit of asking people: "What is the first recollection of your life?" Two things arise upon this occasion.

The first is the discovery that so few people actually think about this, and that they begin to laboriously recollect. Generally speaking, people do not ponder this theme and are forced to dig deep in order to reach their first memory. The second issue concerns the character of those reminiscences. I have asked hundreds of people about this, and it is interesting to discover that each has different recollections. Some are linked with a cat, another - with a fire, and yet others with a boiled sweet purchased by grandmother. These reminiscences vary greatly, and are one of the proofs of man's differentiation. Already the very first recollections distinguish us to such a great extent.

Dariusz Czaja: What do you consider to be the point of departure for memory? What is it? Is it a word? Colour ...?

R. Kapuściński: An image!

Z. Benedyktowicz: An image? And not sound?

R. Kapuściński: It will always be an image. After all, we know that earliest reminiscences concern the period when we were three or four years old, more or less the age when a child thinks in images. As a rule, this is a case of visual recollections. Even if there did take place some sort of a loud noise, such as thunder, it too must have been associated with an image, either of a storm or the place where it took place. I always found this phenomenon extremely interesting and noteworthy. I would like to write about my childhood in Pińsk.

The chaos of memory and the order introduced into it

Z. Benedyktowicz: You have just mentioned that, as a rule, people are forced to delve deep into their memory in order to reach their first reminiscence. Did you encounter such a phenomenon also in your life, when earliest recollections find themselves beneath those that are "worked over", and about which we know that they are the property of others and had been already heard somewhere?

R. Kapuściński: Yes, this has to be cleared up. This is the Husserlian idea of purification. Arrival at these primary things is extremely difficult, especially in the case of those about which we had been already told. This is connected with two overlapping problems with memory and reminiscences. The first is the introduction of order. It turns out that we find it very difficult to put all those recalled images into order and thus encounter certain chaos. In other words, the process of introducing order must be purposeful, conscious, and intended – I must arrange everything in order and determine what was "before" or "after". It becomes necessary to establish the sequences of certain events. This is extremely important for memory. Secondly, that, which is essentially linked with memory or perhaps with its absence is the fact that memory is fragmentary and without a continuum. We remember only certain episodes from the past but do not have access to their complete sequence.

D. Czaja: Additionally, it is interesting to note that we immediately arrange them into some sort of a plot, construe narration, and gather those details into a linear sequence.

R. Kapuściński: We have to do this, otherwise we shall get lost and everything will simply scatter. In other words, in order for memory to function usefully it requires certain operations and effort. This is not automatic since that, which autonomously imposes itself is chaotic, fragmentary, and non-cohesive. Only

the operation of introducing order and hierarchy, the arrangement of memory, becomes extremely relevant. I think in a certain way because I am writing an autobiographical reportage and constantly encounter this problem. I recall an episode from an African country but cannot remember when it took place. What occurred "before" and "after"? Did I stay there in 1967 or perhaps in 1968? Was it Ghana or rather the Republic of South Africa? Here problems start and demand serious effort.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Do you keep such a diary?

R. Kapuściński: No, I am incapable of doing this simply because my journeys are extremely exhausting physically. As a rule, they take place in the tropics, there is a lot of work in progress and texts that have to be immediately handed over; later, I am so tired that I do not have the strength for anything else. Years later, I am compelled to reconstruct the past out of elements: airplane tickets, passport visas, various o

ther things. Furthermore, there is yet another problem, the reason why I am not a great enthusiast of diaries. A person who keeps a diary writes down every day that, which he regards as important. Reading it years later it turns out that usually such records make but a slight contribution. This fact is associated with the selective role of memory.

Take the highly instructive reminiscence about Gorky, who upon a certain occasion was introduced to a young writer named Paustovsky who brought one of his stories. Gorky read it and they made an arrangement to meet again. Gorky said: "Young man, this text shows talent, but I would like to give you a piece of advice: spend the next ten years travelling across Russia, working and earning a living. Write nothing. Do not keep any notes. Once you return, make a record of all that you saw. Why then? Because you shall remember that, which was truly significant, while that, which you do not recall was simply not worth remembering".

At this moment I am writing *Podróże z Herodotem*, i.e. about experiences that took place in the 1950s. I still recall them. By way of example, in 1956, upon the wave of the October thaw, my editorial board sent me for the first time to India. I flew *via* Rome, in an old wartime DC-3. The airplane landed in Rome in the evening. For the first time in my life I saw a town all lit up. This came as such a shock that although fifty years have passed I still remember precisely the view of the illuminated city at night.... This is why I firmly believe in the selective role played by memory. There is no need to member everything because such a process serves no purpose.

D. Czaja: But this would produce an interesting conclusion. Apparently, it is not we who consciously and intentionally put those data into order or construct an image of the past pertaining to us; this process takes place somewhere "in the back of the head",

without our will. In other words, we contain some sort of a selection mechanism that is nothing else but a resultant of all the significant events in our heretofore life.

R. Kapuściński: Yes. It is not that, which I daily decide that I shall remember or forget that is important. It suddenly turns out that I recall a certain thing, which, actually, I should not remember but by some miracle it exists in my memory. Then I start wondering why this is taking place and why I recollect precisely that thing and not another.

D. Czaja: At this stage there comes into being a certain subtlety, not to say: difficulty, probably not the last that we shall discuss today while drifting between memory and oblivion. I have in mind selection associated with memory. You mentioned the "introduction of order" into memory data. If we, however, perform a slight semantic retouching then we shall immediately arrive at the "construction" of memory. Another slight shift and we are dealing with a "mythicisation" of memory. How can those subtleties be separated? Is it at all possible to introduce some sort of an acute distinction? When do we once again deal with such remembrance of the past about which we may say: "This truly took place", and when with something that I described as the mythologisation of memory or, if we speak about the collective dimension, with the ideologisation of memory? After all, each of those operations performs some sort of a selection, right?

R. Kapuściński: In my opinion there is no unambiguous response to this question. All depends on the given person, the situation in which he finds himself, and many different factors. As a reporter I might say that in this case the foundation is some sort of an ethical attitude, an elementary compulsion that says: "I remember that". This means that I am responsible for what I wrote. In other words, I guarantee that I had really experienced something, that the book contains my experience. This was my argument while writing at the time of prevailing censorship. If the censors complained I answered: "I was there, and if you want to, then come with me". It seems to me that personal experience constituted the foundation of what I wrote. At the same time, it provided me with a feeling of power. I do not know how to write, nor am I a typical author. My problem consists of the fact that I am deprived of that sort of imagination, and thus I have to actually be everywhere in order to write something, I have to personally remember things. Everything must leave a direct imprint on my memory. Then, when I come back, I do not deliberate about the form in which I am going to write – a poem, a drama or a philosophical treatise; I simply try to write a text. The point is for this text to be the most faithful recreation of the memory of my experiences, of what I saw and thought. Naturally, I am fully aware that this is all very subjective, i.e. that

everyone sees reality differently. I often encountered this phenomenon during assorted meetings with my readers. Someone stands up and says: "Mister, I saw what you described but it was quite different...". And I absolutely believe him because the number of assorted versions of the same events corresponds to the number of its witnesses. Consequently, there is no such thing as objective memory. Nothing of the sort exists. Memory is the most subjectivised element of culture. We really remember extremely different things. I have a sister who is a year younger and lives in Canada. I did not see her for years and once we met I, thinking about Pińsk, reached for a tape recorder, saying: "Basia, what do you recollect from our years in Pińsk?". Let me add that we are very close and when we were little we always walked holding hands. One could thus say that we saw exactly the same thing. When she began to extract reflections from her memory it turned out that they were totally different from mine. In other words: she remembered things that I did not recollect at all. And *vice versa*. You can see just how strong is the individualisation of memory. As a result, I always use the formula: "according to me, this is what happened". I could never say that my perception is the only true one.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Despite this radical subjectivisation of memory there also exists something like the memory of a generation, perhaps not as objective but one in which people can at least recognise themselves...

R. Kapuściński: Naturally. The memory of a generation or of a nation – they both exist. Just like collective memory I too possess deep archetypal strata, that whole Jungian phenomenon. But in my personal experience as a reporter, a person travelling around the world, collecting observations and stories, and writing about them I am most fascinated by the fact that memory is individualised....

D. Czaja: ... that the past is perceived differently in each personal experience ...

R. Kapuściński: ... extremely so. This is what I find so fascinating in Herodotus, because it turns out that he already tackled these difficulties. The reason lay in the fact that his writing was connected directly with the problem of memory. Recall the opening invocation of his book: *These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done*. Herodotus struggled with the obliteration of memory, encountered already at the time. By way of example, upon his arrival in Thebes he discovered that everyone said something different about a certain past event. To this he responded that he was obliged to describe assorted versions. His task consisted of a faithful presentation. He felt compelled to propose an objective account. It was Herodotus who was the

first in world literature to announce this differentiation of memory and the image of the past. We know, however, that past reality resembles quicksand. We all make our way along this sandy terrain, of which no one is certain.

D. Czaja: There undoubtedly exists some sort of tension between subjectivity and the objective image of a thing. You mentioned that Herodotus attempted to coordinate various versions of the past. He too, however, was probably not free from subjectivity. Within the context of your recollections of the past you mention the individualisation of memory and the subjectivity of the image of the past. There arises the following problem: what is the situation of an historian who tries to trust memory (witnesses or documents) but, at the same time, tries to solve the question repeated after Ranke: "What actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*)? To put it directly: he attempts to be objective. Do you, in the wake of numerous texts demythologising our naive faith in "genuine reality" recreated by the historian, still believe in the objectivism of historical studies, the scientific, to coin a term, image of the past?

R. Kapuściński: My approach is as follows: I regard the key to such situations and problems to be the French term: *approximation*. In other words, such objectivism is possible only in an approximated form. *Approximation* means that we harbour certain ideals, which we accept and in some way assume. I would like to write an ideal book. But all that I am capable of doing is, at best, to come close to the theoretical ideal, which I have adopted. The same situation occurs in science and the humanities. Everything is *approximation*. Importance is attached to the degree in which we manage to approximate this devised collective ideal. Some succeed in approaching it extremely close whilst others will never attain it. An historian who assumes that he will write an objective book about the battle of Grunwald also presupposes some sort of cognitive ideal. The degree to which he will attain it will become the yardstick of his work. We cannot achieve an absolute because this is simply impossible, and the yardstick of assessing our effort is the degree of approximation to this absolute.

D. Czaja: Fine, but how do we know that we are coming close to the epistemological absolute?

R. Kapuściński: Social awareness contains a functioning concept of the ideal. We feel that a certain novel, for example, *In Search of Lost Time* by Proust, comes close to it, or that Joyce succeeded, but some inferior author did not. This is a collective comprehension of the ideal, just as Znaniecki wrote in *Spoleczne role uczonych* that someone is eminent in a given domain of science. How is one to define who is brilliant in a certain field? The solution proposed by Znaniecki claims that a group of specialists regards someone as

outstanding. This is the criterion, and there is no other. In my opinion, the same holds true for every ideal.

D. Czaja: In other words, this would take place according to the principle of some sort of consensus, a collective contract, right?

R. Kapuściński: Yes, this is the case. Joint reflection, joint evaluation, joint comprehension. This is how I envisage it. I am incapable of discovering a different criterion defining why a particular reportage is considered better than another. People, members of a group, simply think that someone is better, another is worse, and yet another is superior.

D. Czaja: Or could it be that what we describe as "the truth of the past" is simply a function of the time, in which it had been formulated? Let us take a closer look at mediaevalist research in the past several decades. After all, this is not the case of an avalanche discovery of some new, previously unknown documents. The image of the Middle Ages, nonetheless, changed from the infamous "Dark Ages" to excellent multi-strata studies, such as those by Gurievich or recent publications by Le Roy Ladurie. What will happen to those visions of the Middle Ages in another several decades?

R. Kapuściński: The humanities as a whole are deeply immersed in living and endlessly active matter. In Brzozowski's brilliant definition of memory the latter is always working and transposing, and there is no such thing about which we could find out something once and for all. He was of the opinion that it is matter that succumbs to constant transformation.

D. Czaja: If this is so, then perhaps it is the ideal as such that is fiction?

R. Kapuściński: Yes, because this ideal too changes. I maintain that the greatness of the humanities consists of the fact that we permanently work with matter subjected to limitless transformation. It is fascinating to follow its trends and assorted varieties. This is what I find so unusual and interesting. Furthermore, it testifies to the quality of the human intellect.

Bad memory, repressed memory

D. Czaja: We are speaking the whole time about the positive function of memory, memory that salvages, creative memory, and, finally, memory building our identity thanks to which we know who we are and where we come from. I would like us – and by no means due to contrariness – to speak for a while about the sort of memory that can produce resistance and about unwanted, negative memory.

Our discussion thus cannot lack Nietzsche and his celebrated and highly controversial text: *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*. What does Nietzsche tell us? He declared more or less: why do you want to remember? This is the hump that you carry at all times. *The excess of history has seized the plastic force of life. It*

no longer understands how to make use of the past as a powerful nourishment. A whole diatribe against historians and the historical sense. Nietzsche criticised a stand that perceives the world through the prism of sight always focused on the past. He was irritated by the fact that in this manner we build a society that erects shrines to the past and the old.

My question too embarks upon this Nietzschean motif of memory that could become a burden and an obstacle, and which does not create but hampers, especially if it pertains to a cohesive tribal group. Take the example of the war in the Balkans. It is said at times, while observing the frenzied Balkan melting pot, that, paradoxically, if local population groups remembered less and did not accuse each other of the suffering endured in the past, during the lifetime of their fathers or grandparents, and if they were capable of forgetting, then the bloody massacres of the 1990s would have never taken place. What is your opinion about such a portrayal of this issue?

R. Kapuściński: I do not share this opinion. I disagree with Nietzsche, especially considering that today we endure assorted problems involving memory and there exist a number of serious threats entailing memory loss.

On the other hand, here are several remarks about tribalism. Unfortunately, this particular word is endowed with a negative meaning and Africans find its use offensive and prefer "nationality" or "people". They consider *tribe* or *tribalism* to be anathema.

In order to understand what actually took place in the Balkans it is necessary to introduce a certain differentiation, to distinguish between tribal awareness and its use for political purposes and strife. This somewhat resembles the use of a knife to cut bread and ... throats. The same holds true for tribalism, which in itself is an enormous value to be applied either for the sake of a political game or one conducted for winning power and certain political profits. From this point of view, tribalism is a powerful feeling of local community, neither better nor worse than any other emotion. In political games it is possible to make use of every sort of feeling with a tangible outcome. In the Balkans such emotions were applied for destructive and outright murderous purposes. After all, scores of generations led normal lives in harmony. Mixed marriages abounded. Pińsk, where I was born, was an international small town, where 72% of the population was composed of Jews, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Latvians and Lithuanians. There was no feeling of radical animosity. Leaving Pińsk I was bereft of all ethnic awareness and was even unconscious of its existence. We all lived together. As long as a burning fuse is not inserted into such diverse matter - and this can be done only from the outside - there is no threat. It is not part of man's nature, and without that external factor he will

not become ablaze with hatred. This is simply something that man lacks.

D. Czaja: I seriously doubt it. After all, we all belong to "the tribe of Cain", right? I recently watched a shocking British documentary about Srebrenica. Naturally, we know that men have been killing as long as the world exists, but the scale and type of those murders, totally impartial, exceeds all boundaries of our imagination...

R. Kapuściński: True, this is already bestiality. Once the wheel of hatred is set into motion it becomes difficult to stop it. I constantly repeat that I am concerned with one thing: that people will never start anything of this sort by themselves! Take the example of a multi-tribal African town in which every inhabitant has his street and house. Nothing special takes place. Suddenly, one day, agitators arrive and declare: "Listen, you're poor while that man on the next street is a member of the ruling elite; wouldn't you like to be one, too? If you continue to remain passive you'll die of hunger and achieve nothing...". This is the way things start. People go into the streets brandishing machetes and start fighting "for their cause", killing and assaulting. This is the type of mechanism I am concerned with. More exactly, I am anxious about the fact that such a feeling of tribal affiliation may be easily used for political purposes.

D. Czaja: I agree, but it must fall on susceptible ground. Inciting one against the other only awakens dormant demons. And they do really exist!

R. Kapuściński: True, very often they only have to be awakened. I do not maintain that man is an ideal creature, but I do claim that every person contains all sorts of features. It all depends on the sort of traits to which we refer and which we stir. I affirm that man as such does not act in this manner as if "from the inside" and that only certain circumstances will awaken the negative, dark side. This is what I have in mind. True, such darkness exists as an imminent component in a dormant state that could be described as passive. In order to achieve it, it is necessary to create suitable conditions. This is the case with tribalism. On the other hand, I repeat obstinately that clan, family or tribal bonds are an extremely positive emotion since it enables us to function in the world. An individual simply cannot exist outside a clan. This is the essence of the philosophy of African societies and, generally speaking, the philosophy of clan societies as such.

Here lies also one of the differences between the East and the West. In Western civilisation it is the individual who is the most prominent, and we deal with the liberty of the individual, his rights, and so on. In non-Western societies the situation is the reverse - supreme value is attached to the collective, a fact that simply follows from different historical experience, i.e. the individual could not survive in conditions created

by local poverty and is forced to seek the support of the community. Only the latter is capable of facing Nature. The individual is incapable of doing this and of taming Nature. In a word, subjugation to the collective is a condition for endurance in contrast to developed Western civilisation where the individual can easily survive and relish assorted rights. This is a certain luxury, i.e. the enjoyment of civic rights and similar privileges that the highly technological society can well afford. Poor society, dependent on Nature, cannot afford this.

Back to the Balkans. The whole story, as we know, started at the time of the Turkish invasion. Previously, this was a normal and peaceful community. At a certain moment, tribal animosities were stimulated and kept alive. At this stage, the basic issue comes to the fore. My theory about the origin of tribal and national conflicts claims that war did not start on 1 September 1939, nor did it break out on the day when the first shots were fired. In the contemporary world, war begins with changes in the language of propaganda. Whenever we observe language and the way in which it transforms itself and certain words start to appear then it becomes obvious that suddenly there come into being such terms as: enemy, foe, to destroy, to kill ... i.e. there emerges a language of aggression and hatred or, to put it differently, so-called hate speech. There is still no sign of war and nothing is said about it, but the language of communication begins to alter. At that very moment, in the wake of those vagaries of the language and their intensification, we notice the looming menace of war. This process could be classically observed in the Balkans. I claim that each war, be it in Iraq, the Balkans or any other country, starts in this manner.

D. Czaja: Let us, therefore, make matters clear. Our issue presents an extremely interesting fragment of the most recent book by Paul Ricoeur on history, memory, and oblivion. We include a chapter on how to successfully tackle the difficult problem of bad memory. This is a thoroughly practical question and I am even inclined to agree with you that tribalism as such is not a threat. The war in the Balkans has come to an end, and now what? What about memory that does not wish to forget? What should be done about it? It is easy to say: testify, educate, and teach. All this is fine, but we do not really believe in the effectiveness of such activity. After all, we had our *Sąsiedzi*. We also recently held a difficult and painful discussion about Jedwabne. Now what? Should the whole problem be simply described, explained, recalled, and taught at school? Certainly. But something else must also be done. I agree with Ricoeur who wrote about the need for the Freudian term: "the work of mourning", some sort of grief tackling the past. Powerful suffering, a process of filtering the facts. Otherwise, when

traumatic experiences of the past become relegated to textbooks or even, as in the case of Jedwabne, state ceremonies are held, without private mourning we shall as a community enjoy the comfort of feeling that everything has been already done and now we can enjoy peace and quiet. It has all become part of the past. What is your opinion?

R. Kapuściński: Naturally, this is an extensive theme, dramatic and, for all practical purposes, one that does not offer any solutions. I have in mind the fact that the moment when such development has been revealed, the dynamic of destructive processes is appalling. Once this Pandora's box has been opened it becomes extremely difficult to close it again. It will probably be never possible to shut it tightly, a feat that will remain unaccomplished for the next few generations. It is here that time starts to exert an impact. The once incited bloody conflict and the instigation of hatred possess terrible results and cannot be set right in a brief space of time. This is an exceedingly painful circumstance. Man's great frailty consists of the fact that he is unable to abandon it either ultimately or satisfactorily for many generations. Up to this very day, despite the passage of decades, certain societies are completely unable to confront reality. By way of example, Japanese society still refuses to settle accounts with the memory of its past crimes. This great nation is incapable of even approaching the problem. I believe that the task in question is too demanding and horrible ...

D. Czaja: But something must be done and things cannot be left unchanged.

R. Kapuściński: Theoretically, you are right. Naturally, I have in mind good will and intentions. In such cases it is necessary to return to those problems, face them, and mull them over. Once again, this has to be attained with a conviction that in this case too there functions an *approximation* mechanism, i.e. that we may only draw closer to the solution of such questions. This is a case of human weakness, and matters of this sort cannot be ultimately resolved.

D. Czaja: Perhaps this could become the moment when it becomes possible to embark upon the work of, so to speak, wise forgetting. The latter would involve grief or at the very least be preceded by some sort of reflection, if not atonement.

R. Kapuściński: Yes, this is certainly right. Nonetheless, the process in question could be accomplished in relation to only a certain part of society or individuals, but it is difficult to imagine that it could refer to entire societies and communities.

D. Czaja: I insist that something should be done because scores of examples testify that a simple ejection of traumatic past events from memory actually does not yield anything.

R. Kapuściński: It generates nothing because reality stays on.

D. Czaja: Sometimes, it returns with even greater force.

R. Kapuściński: Yes. I think that this is one of those weaknesses of human nature, the nature of societies with which we simply do not know how to deal. There are multiple things about which we do not know what should be done. They entail great themes and equally great weaknesses, such as human cruelty. For centuries, people have been embarking upon similar questions and we are still incapable of tackling them successfully. Dostoevsky was always fascinated by the mystery of unnecessary, disinterested cruelty. A person has killed? Yes. But why does he quarter, slice, boil, why does he additionally... why, why...?

We are incapable of resolving such questions. The essence and greatness of the humanities probably lie in the fact that they recognize the existence of a range of queries to which we shall never find solutions.

Threats to memory and time of commemoration

Z. Benedyktowicz: Let us now discuss the threats to memory looming in contemporary culture, which you mentioned on the margin. In what domains of life would you situate them? Of what are they supposed to consist?

R. Kapuściński: In my opinion, there are three such threats. The first entails the enormous development of mechanical memory carriers, which means that man is slowly unlearning the art of remembrance. The art of memory is something that has to be mastered; one has to learn how to remember. Today, everything is transposed into a computer, a book, a record, an encyclopaedia. We no longer – as has been the case until recently – have to learn everything by heart nor do we have to train our memory since everything is recorded on assorted carriers. Memory is as if relegated from our heads and transferred into mechanical memory carriers although it is an absolutely essential part of human awareness, which Plato described as the soul. The process of getting rid of the art of remembrance poses a very grave menace for human personality. This is by no means a purely mechanical problem. It is something more: it pertains to man's skills and ability to think, to his and our identity. This peril is growing. In the course of the development of the "net" and the computerisation and electronisation of life we shall steadily become invalids as far as our memory is concerned.

The second threat facing memory is, in my opinion, an excess of data. As the British say: abundance of riches. Human awareness is simply flooded with such an amount of information that it is no longer capable of mastering it. This excess acts in the manner of

an avalanche, a burden that makes life impossible and produces permanent exhaustion. Existing information exceeds many times the capacity of the average human intellect.

Finally, the third threat involves the enormous acceleration of historical processes. This means that history used to follow a slow course. Three hundred years ago nothing took place, two hundred years ago – the same, and the human mind was adapted to that tempo. Man could absorb historical moments and those of his life. History exerted a stabilising effect. Man lived in a constant environment, which he was capable of encompassing within his memory and mastering. Now, due to terrible acceleration, on the one hand, temporal and, on the other hand, spatial, with space and time acting as our two fundamental orientation points in the world we have lost the feeling of stabilisation and enrootment in the world.

D. Czaja: How would you, in connection with this multi-trend loss of memory by contemporary society, define our epoch, the time in which we live? By way of example, Pierre Nora, author of the already classical *Les Lieux de mémoire*, seems to be saying something quite different: we live at a time of commemoration, a time of gathering memories. Take a look at numerous memory "sites": museums, archives, compendia, diaries, monuments – assorted "appliances" for remembering. What is actually taking place: are we living at a time of memory or a time of forgetting?

R. Kapuściński: Naturally, museums and archives do exist. I, however, am concerned with something quite different, namely, that more and more of our interior is being extracted and delegated to assorted institutions. I have in mind the entire institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of memory. Various institutions are being established – in Poland, for example, the Institute of National Remembrance – to organise our memory. We are becoming increasingly convinced that "they" will deal with the issue at stake. "They" have their archives and the individual, as I have mentioned, is getting rid of his memory and dispatching it to an anonymous institution. I am concerned with distinctive memory, the sort that differentiates us. This is the memory that we develop in time and *via* which we create ourselves, our identity, and personality. We differ, i.e. due to the fact that we have diverse memories, that each one of us remembers different things and values, and becomes attached to certain stages or types of memory.

Furthermore, I am concerned with the fact that the statement that we live at a time of remembrance can be at most a symbol of the fact that we live at a time of increasingly institutionalised memory and less so at a time of memory as a personal, private value.

D. Czaja: Perhaps it would be possible to combine those two things. It could be deduced already



Africa. Photo: Ryszard Kapuściński

from what you have said that the search conducted in one's past, described by scholars, the quest for family genealogies, literary or cinematic returns to the time of childhood, museum tours, the universal predilection among readers for diaries, and various types of nostalgia, in a word, the whole movement "towards memory" is some sort of a counter-reaction to the earlier mentioned civilisation acceleration. Could this be an instinctive defence against Miłosz's *accélération d'histoire*, that powerful and still encroaching variability of daily life?

R. Kapuściński: I do not claim that these phenomena exclude each other. I do maintain, however, that the situation in which the art of remembering is handed over to institutions is a dangerous tendency. Nor do I insist that this is a case of either one or the other. We know that by the very nature of things man is a lazy creature and prefers to seek diverse facilitations in life; hence I discern in this process a trend towards rendering life easier. This is not a charge addressed against technology. Imagine, however, a situation in which everything has been already computerised and suddenly a virus attacks this digitally recorded memory. It could then turn out that we shall remain totally deprived of all memory. Naturally, I am speaking about certain hazards, those bad paths of civilizational progress. I do not maintain that all is a catastrophe nor do I prophesy the end of the world.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Earlier, you mentioned threats facing memory in the contemporary world in connection with the development of new technologies. To what extent, in your opinion, could conventional divisions into societies "with history" and "without history", once existing in anthropology, be referred to the contemporary world? Is it possible to speak today about "societies with memory" and "without memory"? Characteristically, American culture used to be described as culture without memory not because it has a relatively brief history but also owing to a distinct appreciation of the present, for living for the moment, for life without that constant gazing into the past, so typical for Europe. Quite possibly, the absence of significant traumatic experiences is the reason why in that model of culture people are so insensitive to the past and do not experience so strongly the pressure of the duty to remember and to conserve memory. Is American culture really like that? How does this appear from the perspective of your American experiences?

R. Kapuściński: We live in a world in which multicultural qualities are a norm. We are enclosed within a world of assorted cultures and traditions offering us totally dissimilar commodities. On the one hand, we are dealing with societies dominated by oral cultures: i.e. the societies of America, Latin America or Asia, where this symptom of values really prevails. There

exists yet another type of society, bearing the heavy burden of historical thought. It includes our society and European societies in general. History constitutes a large part of our culture: historical thought, the symbolic of historical memory, the feeling of a continuum in time. Then there is a third group of new societies, whose roots stem from emigration and whose history is relatively brief: the USA, Canada, Australia, and other, smaller ones. They are no more than 200 years old and are not burdened with history; thus their world faces the future. One could say that the future is their past.

But this too is changing. Take a look at all that, which transpired in the US in the wake of 11 September. This was a classical example of building own tradition, a nobilitation of patriotism, and the construction of identity around such symbolic signs as the flag and the anthem. These new societies clearly experience the need to create national identity, which they cannot derive from the past since they simply do not have it. They lack some sort of a "battle of Grunwald" or an event with a similar rank. Hence, they are compelled to erect this "past" *ad hoc*. I would not be inclined to say that this is a bad thing. Generally speaking, they find the idea of hierarchising culture strange. Such a society is what it is because it has a certain history and simply has to be accepted as such.

D. Czaja: Nonetheless, it is possible to observe in American culture also other types of a return to the past, this time in a rather more grotesque version. Take the example of the rather comical snobbery for "the old", naturally in its European version. "American" books by Eco or Baudrillard mention all those churches or castles transferred to distant Idaho and there recreated anew brick by brick, as well as other artificial practices of prolonging one's lineage. Naturally, this is not only an American speciality. What are we to think, for instance, about the contemporary phenomenon – actually, a fashion – for an artificial resurrection of the past, a costume-like enlivening of memory? You mentioned a moment ago the battle of Grunwald, which reminds me of a certain amusing newspaper article about the annual recreation of the "battle of Grunwald" on the historical site, involving teams of knights, "our" men and the enemy, using swords and lances and engaged in armed skirmishes. Interestingly, the outcome is not historically predetermined. I even recently heard that the Teutonic Knights won [laughter]. How would you assess those returns to the past, the whole process of putting on – literally and metaphorically – someone else's costume? Just how sensible is this theatricalisation of memory, which some might find funny and others – grotesque? Do such journeys into the past actually assist in regaining memory?

R. Kapuściński: I would say that as long as people are not killing or setting fire to each other...



Africa. Photo: Ryszard Kapuściński

D. Czaja: ... then let them play...

R. Kapuściński: Yes, let them play. I, theretofore, would not perceive anything blameworthy in those phenomena. Naturally, this is connected with the fact that we are living in a world of intensively functioning mass culture and, as result, a world of enormous deposits of kitsch, which has already become a permanent element of culture. Some might find this to their liking, while others might not; these mass culture phenomena can be ignored or criticized but they shall objectively exist. Willingly or not, we are compelled to participate in this process.

Z. Benedyktowicz: My question about American culture has also a second hidden agenda. Naturally, we know enough about American pop culture and numerous phenomena, including embarrassing ones, from this particular domain. On the other hand, if we inquire about the best chairs of classical philology in the world then it turns out that, as Zygmunt Kubiak said during a discussion held by our editorial board, ancient Greek studies flourish best at Harvard...

R. Kapuściński: It must be kept in mind that American society is highly diversified. The campus phenomenon takes place also in this world. But this is a closed enclave, almost totally isolated from society. It is, and is not, America. True, in each academic domain you encounter all: means, ambition and talent. These people are intentionally drawn there and enjoy excellently organized work. Such campuses represent the highest possible level. The whole problem consists of the fact that they exert but a slight impact on the rest of the country. This is also the reason why I find it difficult to say that all those phenomena are actually "America", just as those who are familiar with Africa find it difficult to use the name: "Africa". "America" and "Africa" are comprised of so many realities simultaneously, so many different worlds, at time highly contradictory, that the application of a single name in order to encompass everything is simply misleading.

Z. Benedyktowicz: I would like to ask about yet another detail, closely connected with historical trauma and ways of overcoming this sort of memory. In his review of *Rondo de Gaulle'a*, a book by Olga Stanisławska, Jacek Olędzki wrote about an issue strange for the European: African museums, even those focused on colonialism, lack martyrological memory. In other words, the strong presence of the cult of ancestors seems to have replaced remembrance, that specific process of concentrating on the painful past so familiar to us from personal experience. Is this really the case?

R. Kapuściński: Let us start from the fact that there are no European-style museums in Africa. They are museums only because that is their name and they do not display anything of special importance. No such institutions exist. Local culture and tradition lack a remembrance site of the "here men were shot, there they were

hanged..." sort. Everything is forgotten. Something quite different is at stake, and this is a model of culture totally different from its European counterpart. Start with the fact that the dead must be immediately buried. The first reaction is to instantly inter the person who died or had been killed. There is no funeral ceremony or preparations of the sort known to us...

This fact is also connected with a totally different attitude to time, its treatment and experiencing. If an ancestor is recalled then not as a martyr but because he is still alive, participates in the life of the community by giving advice, metes punishment or reprimands; in a word, he remains next to, and together with us. Significantly, such ancestors are buried in the direct proximity of the homestead. Numerous graves are located next to homes and often the living walk over them. The ancestor seems to have departed but he remains an extremely ambivalent figure. It is impossible to totally forget him because he continues to function. Illness among the living could be a sign that we have neglected some of our duties *vis a vis* the ancestor, who in this way reminds us that he still exists.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Perhaps this awareness that ancestors continue to accompany us does not generate martyrological remembrance and cultural martyrdom?

R. Kapuściński: Yes, because belief in the presence of the deceased is extremely strong. This holds true not only for African religions. Such a conviction about the return of the dead is a constant component of numerous religions in which the boundary between life and death is never final or total. Such an approach remains so absolutely at odds with our culture in which death is a terrible caesura. There it is fluent reality. Consequently, despair is also dissimilar and extremely theatrical, since basically death is something quite natural. I always experienced this as a problem on assorted African frontlines. Sometimes, accompanying these men I realised that they were facing certain death. They, on the other hand, treated it as something normal; quite simply: someone dies. The relation between the living and the dead differs. This is a positive philosophy inasmuch as death does not produce such a terrible gap in the world around us. It is not horrendous tragedy or insufferable pain.

Remember that the average African woman used to give birth to twenty children and that throughout the whole childbearing stage in her life she produced a child year after year. Out of this total some five children survived, quite a large number. If, therefore, a woman buries her children each year her attitude towards death is totally dissimilar to ours. She lives and simply gives birth to successive offspring. The relation towards death and life is totally different. In certain Latin American countries I often accompanied groups of Indians. In Bolivia or Peru, I would suddenly see a father carrying a small coffin made of plain boards to be buried in a cemetery high in the mountains. A thing quite inconceivable in

Poland, but understandable within the rules of local culture.

“I shall never finish this book!”

Z. Benedyktowicz: I have the impression that so far we have said too little about the book you are now writing: *Podróż z Herodotem*. Here are a few details. I know that the book, albeit with a famous ancient historian in the background, originates from individual, private memory ...

R. Kapuściński: ... both mine and his. To a certain extent this is a highly autobiographical book based on authentic experiences. Everything started when in 1956 I was presented with the idea - an exercise of sorts - of a voyage to India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Naturally, it accompanied me all over the world although not always. Now, years later, I read Herodotus anew. But this is exactly what happens with a book - obviously, if it is good and outstanding. It turns out that each time we read it as if it was new. The extraordinary feature of a great book is the fact that it contains many books, or rather their endless number. One could describe it as multi-text. The extraction of those assorted texts depends on when we read the book, in what sort of circumstances, mood, and situation, and what we seek in it at the given moment.

Summing up: I regard Herodotus to be a teacher of sorts, who taught me perception of the world as well as an attitude towards others and different cultures. After all, he was the first globalist, the first to understand that in order to comprehend one's culture it is necessary to become acquainted with others, since the essence of our culture is reflected only in the latter. This is the reason

why he travelled across the world, attempting to render the Greeks aware of the nature of their culture when facing other cultures.

Z. Benedyktowicz: Thanking you for accepting the invitation of our editorial board and for the stimulating conversation I ask once again: when can we expect your book to be published?

R. Kapuściński: Without disclosing too much I would like to add that this book has produced grave problems. I chiefly have in mind the way in which I should control the entire classical material. After all, there recently took place a significant breakthrough in historical research, and in the past years we have all witnessed a great revolution in this domain. Consequently, unruffled traditional science about antiquity is starting to become somewhat part of the past. There exists a vast new literature on the topic, with which I am making my very first acquaintance. Since the whole time I have maintained contacts with my friends, experts on antiquity, they assist me by proposing various interesting titles and urge: “Look, this could be useful, and you must read this or that”, to which I respond: “I shall never finish writing this book!”. Naturally, the proposed studies are extremely interesting and I eagerly study them since they recommend is an entirely new approach to history, extremely vital and in accord with novel tendencies described as postmodern. Consequently, there is no way out: this *Herodotus* is still growing.

Arrangement of discussion

Dariusz Czaja

The editors would like to thank the author and Ms. Iza Wojciechowska for the photographs and cooperation.

