

Practically speaking I should have left Peking the day after I arrived. But my newspaper was mum—fearful and fighting for its survival, it had forgotten about me. Or perhaps the editors had my interests in mind—perhaps they reckoned that away in China I would somehow be safe! In any event, I now think that the editors of *Chungkuo* were being informed by the Chinese embassy in Warsaw that the correspondent of *Sztandar Młodych* is the envoy of a newspaper hanging by a thread and it is only a matter of time before it goes under the ax I think, too, that it was traditional Chinese principles of hospitality, the importance the Chinese ascribe to saving face, as well as their highly cultivated politeness, that kept me from being summarily expelled. Instead, they created conditions which they assumed would lead me to guess that the models of cooperation that had been agreed to earlier no longer obtained. And that I would say of my own accord: I am leaving.

From: Travels with Herodotus

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MEMORY ALONG THE ROADWAYS OF THE WORLD

Immediately upon returning home I left the newspaper and got a job at the Polish Press Agency. Because I had arrived from China, my new boss, Michał Hofman, concluded my expertise must lie in matters of the Far East and decided that this would now be my beat—specifically, the part of Asia to the east of India and extending to the innumerable islands of the Pacific.

We all know a little about everything, but I knew nothing about the countries I had been assigned, and so I burned the midnight oil studying up on guerrilla warfare in the jungles of Burma and Malaysia, the revolts in Sumatra and Sulawesi, the rebellions of the Moro tribe in the Philippines. The world once again presented itself to me as something impossible to even begin to comprehend, let alone master. And all the more so because, given my work, I had so little time to devote to it. All day long dispatches arrived in my office from various countries which I had to read, translate, condense, edit and send on to newspapers and radio stations.

In this manner, because news reached me daily from places like Rangoon or Singapore, Hanoi, Manila, or Bandung, my travels through the countries of Asia—commenced in India and Afghanistan, continued in Japan and China—went on uninterrupted. On my desk, under glass, I had a prewar map of the Asian

continent over which I often wandered with my finger, searching for Phnom Penh or Surabaya, the Solomon Islands or the difficult-to-locate Laog, places where there had just been a coup attempt against Someone Important, or where the workers at a rubber plantation had just gone on strike. I transported myself in my thoughts now here, now there, trying to imagine those locales and events.

Sometimes, when the offices emptied in the evening and the hallways grew quiet, and I wanted a respite from telegrams about the strikes and armed conflicts, the coups and explosions convulsing countries I did not know, I reached for *The Histories* of Herodotus, lying in my drawer.

Herodotus begins his book with a statement explaining why he set out to write it in the first place:

Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. The purpose is to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks, among the matters covered is in particular the cause of the hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks.

This passage is the key to the entire book.

First of all, Herodotus informs us therein, that he carried out some sort of "enquiry" (I would prefer to use the term "investigation"). Today we know that he devoted his entire life to this—and it was, for its time, a long life indeed. Why did he do it? Why, still in his youth, did he make such a decision? Did someone encourage him to conduct these investigations? Commission him to undertake them? Or did Herodotus enter the service of some potentate, or of a council of elders, or of an oracle? Who needed this intelligence? And what for?

Or maybe he did everything on his own initiative, possessed by a passion for knowledge, driven by a restless and unfocused compulsion? Perhaps he had a naturally inquiring mind, a mind that continuously generated a thousand questions giving him no peace, keeping him up at nights? And if he was gripped by such an absolute private mania—which after all has been known to happen—how did he find the time to satisfy it, year after year after year?

Herodotus admits that he was obsessed with memory, fearful on its behalf. He felt that memory is something defective, fragile, impermanent—illusory, even. That whatever it contains, whatever it is storing, can evaporate, simply vanish without a trace. His whole generation, everyone living on earth at that time, was possessed by that same fear. Without memory one cannot live, for it is what elevates man above beasts, determines the contours of the human soul, and yet it is at the same time so unreliable, elusive, treacherous. It is precisely what makes man so unsure of himself. Wait, wasn't that...? Come on, you can remember, when was that...? Wasn't it the one that...? Try to remember, how was it...? We do not know, and stretching beyond that "we do not know" is the vast realm of ignorance; in other words—of nonexistence.

Man does not obsess about memory today as he once did because he lives surrounded by stockpiles of it. Everything is at his fingertips—encyclopedias, textbooks, dictionaries, compendia, search engines. Libraries and museums, antiquarian bookshops and archives. Audio and video recordings. Infinite supplies of preserved words, sounds, images—in apartments, in warehouses, in basements, in attics. If he is a child, his teacher will tell him everything he needs to know; if he is a university student, he will be informed by his professors.

Of course none, or almost none, of these institutions, devices, or

techniques existed in Herodotus's time. Man knew as much, and only as much, as his mind managed to preserve. A few privileged individuals started to learn to write on rolls of papyrus and on clay tablets. But the rest? Culture was always an aristocratic enterprise. And wherever it departs from this principle, it perishes as such.

In the world of Herodotus, the only real repository of memory is the individual. In order to find out that which has been remembered, one must reach this person. If he lives far away, one has to go to him, to set out on a journey. And after finally encountering him, one must sit down and listen to what he has to say—to listen, remember, perhaps write it down. That is how reportage begins; of such circumstances it is born.

So Herodotus wanders the world, meets people, listens to what they tell him. They speak of who they are, they recount their history. But how do they know who they are, and where they came from? Ah, they answer, they have it on the word of others—first and foremost, from their ancestors. It is they who transmitted their knowledge to this generation, just as this one is now transmitting it to others. The knowledge takes the form of various tales. People sit around the fire and tell stories. Later, these will be called legends and myths, but in the instant when they are first being related and heard, the tellers and the listeners believe in them as the holiest of truths, absolute reality.

They listen, the fire burns, someone adds more wood, the flames renewed warmth quickens thought, awakens the imagination. The spinning of tales is almost unimaginable without a fire crackling somewhere nearby, or without the darkness of a house illuminated by an oil lamp or a candle. The fire's light attracts, unites, galvanizes attentions. The flame and community. The flame and history. The flame and memory. Heracitus, who lived

before Herodotus, considered fire to be the origin of all matter, the primordial substance. Like fire, he said, everything is in eternal motion, everything is extinguished only to flare up again. Everything flows, but in flowing, it undergoes transformation. So it is with memory. Some of its images die out, but new ones appear in their place. The new ones are not identical to those that came before—they are different. Just as one cannot step twice into the same river, so it is impossible for a new image to be exactly like an earlier one.

It is this principle of an irreversible passing away that Herodotus understands perfectly, and he wants to set himself in opposition to its destructive power: to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time.

Still, what boldness, what a sense of self-importance and mission: presuming to prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time. Human events! But how did he know that any such thing as "human events" even exists? His predecessor, Homer, described the history of a single, specific war, the one with Troy, and then the adventures of a solitary wanderer, Odysseus. But human events! That term in itself represents a new way of thinking, a new concept, a new horizon. With that sentence, Herodotus reveals himself to us as anything but a provincial scribe, a narrow-minded lover of his own little polis, mere patriot of one of the dozens of city-states of which Greece was then composed. No! From the very outset the author of *The Histories* enters the stage as a visionary on a world scale, an imagination capable of encompassing planetary dimensions—in short, as the first globalist.

Of course, the map of the world which Herodotus has before him, or which he imagines, differs from the one confronting us today. His world is much smaller than ours. Its center consists of the mountainous and (at the time) forested lands around the

Aegean Sea. Those lying on the western shore constitute Greece; those on the eastern, Persia. And so right away we hit upon the heart of the matter—Herodotus is born, grows up, and just as he starts to figure out everything around him, one of his very first observations is that the world is sundered, split into East and West, and that these halves are in a state of dissension, conflict, war.

The question that immediately suggests itself to him, as well as to any thinking human being, is "Why should this be so?" And it is this very question that informs the foreword of Herodotus's masterpiece: Here are presented the results of the enquiry carried out by Herodotus of Halicarnassus . . . in particular, the cause of the hostilities . . .

Precisely. We can see that this question, oft repeated since the dawn of history, has vexed humankind for thousands of years now: Why do peoples wage war against one another? What are the origins of wars? What do people hope to accomplish when they start a war? What drives them? What do they think? What is their goal? An unending litany of questions! Herodotus dedicates his life, diligently, tirelessly, to finding the answers. But from among the many issues, some quite general and abstract, he selects the most concrete to investigate, the events that took place before his very eyes or of which memories were still fresh and alive or, even if slightly faded, still very much available. In other words, he concentrates his attention and his inquiries on the following subject: Why does Greece (that is, Europe) wage war with Persia (that is, with Asia)? Why do those two worlds—the West (Europe) and the East (Asia)—fight against each other, and do so to the death? Was it always thus? Will it always be thus?

He is profoundly intrigued by this subject; indeed, he is preoccupied, absorbed, insatiable. We can imagine a man like him possessed by an idea that gives him no peace. Activated, unable to sit still, moving constantly from one place to another. Wherever he

appears there is an atmosphere of agitation and anxiety. People who dislike budging from their homes or walking beyond their own backyards—and they are always and everywhere in the majority—treat Herodotus's sort, fundamentally unconnected to anyone or anything, as freaks, fanatics, lunatics even.

Could it be that Herodotus is regarded in just this way by his contemporaries? He says nothing about this himself. Did he even pay attention to such things? He was occupied with his travels, with the preparations for them and then with the selection and organization of the materials he brought home. A journey, after all, neither begins in the instant we set out, nor ends when we have reached our doorstep once again. It starts much earlier and is really never over, because the film of memory continues running on inside of us long after we have come to a physical standstill. Indeed, there exists something like a contagion of travel, and the disease is essentially incurable.

We do not know in what guise Herodotus traveled. As a merchant (the proverbial occupation of people of the Levant?) Probably not, since he had no interest in prices, goods, markets. As a diplomat? That profession did not exist yet. As a spy? But for which state? As a tourist? No, tourists travel to rest, whereas Herodotus works hard on the road—he is a reporter, an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a historian. And he is at the same time a typical wanderer, or, as others like him will later be called in medieval Europe, a pilgrim. But this wandering of his is no picaresque, carefree passage from one place to another. Herodotus's journeys are purposeful—they are the means by which he hopes to learn about the world and its inhabitants, to gather the knowledge he will feel compelled, later, to describe. Above all, what he hopes to describe are the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks.

That is his original intent. But with each new expedition the world expands on him, multiplies, assumes enormous proportions. It turns out that beyond Egypt there is still Libya, and beyond that the land of the Ethiopians, in other words, Africa; that to the East, after traversing the expanses of Persia (which requires more than three months of rapid walking), one arrives at the towering and inaccessible Babylon, and beyond that at the homeland of the Indians, the outer boundaries of which lie who knows where; that to the West the Mediterranean Sea stretches far indeed, to Abyla and the Pillars of Herakles, and beyond that, they say, there is still another sea; and there are also seas and steppes to the north, and forests inhabited by countless Scythian peoples.

Anaximander of Miletus (a beautiful city in Asia Minor), who predated Herodotus, created the first map of the world. According to him, the earth is shaped like a cylinder. People live on its upper surface. It is surrounded by the heavens and floats suspended in the air, at an equal distance from all the heavenly bodies. Various other maps come into being in that epoch. Most frequently, the earth is represented as a flat, oval shield, surrounded on all sides by the waters of the great river Oceanus. Oceanus not only bounds all the world, but also feeds all the earth's other rivers.

The center of this world was the Aegean Sea, its shores and islands. Herodotus organizes his expeditions from there. The further he moves toward the ends of the earth, the more frequently he encounters something new. He is the first to discover the world's multicultural nature. The first to argue that each culture requires acceptance and understanding, and that to understand it one must first come to know it. How do cultures differ from one another? Above all in their customs. Tell me how you dress, how you act, what are your habits, which gods you honor—and I will tell you who you are. Man not only creates culture, inhabits it, he carries it around within him—man is culture.

Herodotus, who knows a lot about the world, nevertheless does not know everything about it. He never heard of China or Japan, did not know of Australia or Oceania, had no inkling of the existence, much less of the great flowering of the Americas. If truth be told, he knew little of note about western and northern Europe. Herodotus's world is Mediterranean—Near Eastern; it is a sunny world of seas and lakes, tall mountains and green valleys, olives and wine, lambs and fields of grain—a bright Arcadia which every few years overflows with blood.