

Another Day of Life

R.Kapusinski

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Kapusinski is an anomaly. A Polish foreign correspondent, primarily reporting from Africa. He does not give the impression of being a tough, fearless man, on the contrary he gives you every indication of being humanly anxious and worried, well attuned to the precariousness of his security. Yet he repeatedly puts his life on the line, heedlessly arranging himself into situations of extreme danger, courting death at every corner. Why does he do that? The unquenchable lust for adventure, to live at that sharp edge that divides life from death, and which the palpable threat of the latter, gives to the former a supreme sweetness? Human minds are enigmas, on which psychology makes little indentation; but psychology apart, there is also the problems of physics. How come such repeated playing of Russian Roulette sooner or later does not land him on his back permanently? Does he exaggerate the dangers? Maybe, but nevertheless they are real enough, and forty years of exposure and more, surely must add up, whatever the level of objective risk. Or is he singularly lucky, the darling of the gods, who, as we all know, love fools, protecting them against any mishap. Maybe it is not a question of Russian roulette, but Polish, in which the gun is never loaded, unbeknownst to the one who pulls the trigger.

Angola is one of the sorriest parts of Africa. Armed conflict having been endemic ever since the removal of the Portuguese forces at the eve of independence. And of course long before, the entire history of Portuguese subjugation being one of endless wars and military expeditions. The book itself gives but a slice of the action, the scattered and confused impressions as experienced by a hapless witness. We are invited to share his tribulations in the capital as it is slowly being vacuated, slowly degenerating, as more and more of the communal services we take for granted are being withheld. There are visits to the front, wherever that is, part of the perennial confusion of the war is that it is not well defined, scattered forces roaming around, accidentally running into each other. One visit in particular involves the protection of a young and beautiful soldier, so enticing in fact, that a Portuguese television crew, flown in on a brief touchdown, decide to risk their lives after all, in spite of being newly married with incipient families and having just acquired desirable real estate back in Lisbon. Risking your life is not the same as losing it, and the crew can return back unscathed, but not the young beautiful woman, who stays behind, covering their retreat from the scene at emerging dusk, and becomes one of countless casualties as a consequence.

Angola is a country rich in raw material. For centuries this mainly involved Black Slaves. A large part of the Black population in Latin America is of Angolese progeny. The country was bled almost to death and remains one of the least populated in Africa. Kapusinsky refers to a rich wild life as well. Elephants, lions, leopards, antelopes, hippopotamuses as well as crocodile and countless species of birds. This is reassuring to the armchair tourist. But for how long? Now there is oil and diamonds, under the respective control of rival warlords. This richness translates into an unending flow of cash and hence

makes possible the continuation of armed conflict decade after decade.

The main part of the book gives little idea of what it is all about. This is intentional. The correspondent on the ground lacks oversight, he is desperate for information, but he is alone, embattled, and most of his energies are consumed just staying above water. What he can supply is the feeling of being there, what it really means. To get a better view the author adds to the book an appendix, an 'ABC', obviously written many years after the reporting. In this the mere outlines of the conflict can be traced, the origin of the acronyms, MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA. The two latter unite along with South African forces, while the former, representing the Socialist authority of the regime, is in the last moment being reinforced by Cuban soldiers. This prevents a total collapse. The President of Angola is a former poet, this is not unusual in Africa. Poet or not, it has little effect on the indigenous violence. A violence which after decades of fighting now is ingrained in the soil in the form of unexploded mines. The past was bleak, the future looks even bleaker, devoid of the hope which nevertheless must have inspired the past.

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