Travels and Truth: In memory of Paul Klebnikov

By Jonathan Karp

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I am honored to be here today, and I would like to thank Ashok, the class of ’81 and the History Department for inviting me to speak to you in memory of Paul Klebnikov. It’s been 26 years since I sat where you all are – hoping to hear entertaining, inspiring words, or eager, perhaps, to get out early and dash to the grill.

I hope I can satisfy both urges.

I am here partly because of circumstance. Had Paul not moved into Webster North in the middle of our first year at Exeter, I might not have known him. He left an immediate and lasting impression, from his piercing but deep-set eyes to an equally piercing, caustic wit. I had come to Exeter from a small southern town, and Paul – who to many others here may have been just another New Yorker – represented to me a direct link to something bigger in the world. The son of Russian émigrés, he was multilingual and steeped in an exotic culture. His father was head of the interpreter corps at the United Nations. I remember thinking how cool it was to have a friendly connection to the Cold War, which was raging at the time.

Paul succeeded me as editorial page editor of The Exonian, and my graduation from here was the last time I saw him. Yet we stayed on roughly parallel paths. We both chose to pursue journalism, and we were both lured into the profession in part by the Soviet Union. For me, the tug came two years after Exeter. In 1982 I traveled to the Soviet Union to visit a Newsweek correspondent – who, as it happened, got expelled from the country later that summer. In Moscow, I remember heady times celebrating late into the night with a refusenik, an intellectual who had just received

permission to move to the West. I also had an experience that made me feel as if I had been liberated myself. Enroute to Vienna, I was taken off a train at the border with Czechoslovakia, because I didn't have the right visa to pass through. My copy of *The Russians,* by Hedrick Smith was confiscated, and I was kept in the station all night while a Russian bureaucrat decided what to do with me.

Superpower tensions intruded on even mundane personal interactions. In the railroad station office, Soviet state television news was reporting on Israel's fresh invasion of Lebanon, and my Soviet baby-sitter chided *me* for the fact that the U.S. supplied weapons to Israel and thus was waging a proxy war against an ally of Moscow's, the Palestine Liberation Organization. As the night proceeded, I redirected our conversation away from politics and asked questions about his life. Establishing a more personal connection, I somehow wore him down, persuading him not to send me to Kiev – 15 hours in the wrong direction. Instead, he agreed to take me to the nearby border with Hungary, where, I had figured out from my guide book, I could get a visa on the spot. At 5 a.m., a Red Army soldier escorted me to the center of a bridge and handed me off to Hungarian troops. A commander was woken up to come sign my visa. He grumpily demanded my Western-made ballpoint pen as a kickback, and then declined to give me a ride into town.

I was "free." Admittedly, I was in the middle of nowhere, but I had felt the presence of bigger forces, the Iron Curtain, Communism and what not. At the age of 20, I was hooked on the idea that more such adventures lay ahead if I were to become a foreign correspondent. (I never made it back to Russia as a journalist, partly because I married a Brazilian, whose genetic make-up doesn't allow her to live too far from the tropics.)

Nearly 24 years after that trip, and after having the privilege of living and working in the Middle East, Asia and South America, I am speaking to you today because a colleague's adventure cost him his life. Regrettably, Paul Klebnikov's accused assassins were acquitted last week, and there still is no closure to his tragic death. Russian prosecutors have said they will appeal.

Paul isn't my only journalist friend whose murder remains an open wound. My successor as The Wall Street Journal's South Asia correspondent was Daniel Pearl. Four months after the September 11, 2001, attacks, and in the wake of the U.S.-led ouster of the Taliban and al-Qaeda from control of Afghanistan, Danny was kidnapped in Karachi, Pakistan, and murdered by extremists.

Both Danny and Paul died doing their jobs as journalists, which is to pursue the truth. Truth can be elusive, fleeting, relative – and it almost always causes discomfort. A journalist's job is to be an honest broker of information, not a crusader for a narrow cause, but certainly a challenger of conventional wisdom. It requires an open mind to consider all sides and to constantly challenge our own preconceived notions. Our credibility comes from balance and fairness. And, journalistic courage – often glamorized by a correspondent dropping into a battlefield – comes rather from the conviction to stand by the facts that we uncover, and to resist intimidation. If anything, the deaths of Paul and Danny are reminders of the dangers to journalists working well outside of any battle zone.

Reporting in countries undergoing big social and economic change can be especially rewarding – and challenging. That's because in addition to investigating injustice and intolerance, you also have to analyze and explain one culture to an audience from another. Serious journalists like Paul and

Danny had to work even harder to bestow understanding because the recent clutter of round-the-clock media and commentary-posing-as-news often distort facts, which in turn can fan injustice, intolerance, extremism, and cloud the truth.

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As I mentioned, I went into journalism because I wanted to witness history, and I'd like to share some vignettes of my experiences abroad. I feel lucky to have I had a rich run. In Israel, I covered the first Palestinian uprising, the 1991 Gulf War with Scud missiles raining down, and the advent of the Arab-Israeli peace process. (Just as importantly, Jerusalem was where I met my wife, Miriam Jordan, a fellow journalist who shared my wanderlust.) In Hong Kong, I watched a vibrant enclave edge toward an uncertain unity with China, a giant country trying to shed an historic chip on its shoulder. I got to India still in the early stages of its momentous economic awakening. And while in Brazil, the country underwent a controlled democratic earthquake with the election of its first genuine "working class" president.

Along the way, I learned some truths about the cultures in which I lived and about the dilemmas of being a reporter. One image that brought both issues into focus: a lone boot with a foot still inside.

It was the night of December 1, 2001. I had returned to Israel temporarily for The Wall Street Journal after 9/11. Driving to my hotel after dinner that Saturday – the big night out for Israelis – I was caught in traffic in downtown Jerusalem. After taking a roundabout route, I ended up at the top edge of Jerusalem's main pedestrian mall. The second Palestinian uprising was in full swing, and despite the threat of terrorist attacks, the

mall's restaurants, cafes and stores were hopping. As I drove by slowly, I recall feeling uncomfortable with this semblance of normalcy.

Just then, about 100 yards down the pedestrian mall, I saw a flash and heard two explosions in rapid succession. I knew immediately what had happened, and so I pulled over and parked. Then I juggled two roles: what was I, a regular eyewitness to a double suicide bombing, or a journalist trained to be detached? I chose a third role: a husband who didn't want his wife halfway around the world in Brazil to see scenes of carnage on TV, and wonder if I was all right. I called her from my cellphone, barely making myself heard above the pandemonium of shouts and sirens.

Then I ran to the blast site and saw that severed foot in the boot at a shop entrance. People were screaming in agony all around me. I juggled the roles again: do I participate or observe? Unlike 9/11, when several of my Wall Street Journal colleagues were directly threatened – and some nearly killed – when the World Trade Center towers collapsed across the street from our headquarters, in this case, I wasn't under attack. Maybe I could help save some lives. Would an act of compassion cross a professional line? Are journalists meant to be heartless at such moments?

In different circumstances, Paul Klebnikov grappled with this dilemma as he reported in Russia, a land that was literally in his blood – and at times made it boil. There is a constant journalistic tug between passion, which drives your reporting deeper into a subject, and dispassion, the distance that protects your credibility. Likewise, I imagine that many of you can relate to having to make judgment calls here at Exeter about ethical, social or academic issues.

For me, Israel, where I started my career, was a constant gut check on these matters, and a great professional training ground. The truth about the

Arab-Israel conflict that emerged that night was that it made it imperative for Israel – on its own – to create a physical barrier between it and the Palestinian areas. Separation, not peace. Talking was over for the foreseeable future. Indeed, another suicide bombing the next day effectively sealed the fate of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, as the Israeli army quarantined him at his West Bank headquarters virtually until his death.

The truth I learned that night about being a journalist: You deal with the challenges on a case-by-case basis. I didn't stand around the suicide-bomb site just taking notes, and I didn't discard my pen altogether. I let the professionals tend to the wounded and I did my part by trying to keep the throngs of onlookers back so that the medics had room to work. Twenty minutes later a car bomb – meant to kill people rushing to help the first victims – exploded in a nearby street. The next day, shop and restaurant owners defiantly replaced glass panes in order to reopen as soon as possible.

Such matter-of-factness by Israelis in the face of attack can be jarring. I recall an incident during the 1991 Gulf War. Toward the end of the war, I had to leave Israel for a quick trip to the U.S. As I was about to board the plane, air raid sirens went off, signaling an incoming scud missile from Iraq. Airport authorities hustled passengers back on buses to return to the terminal, where we had handed in our gas masks. At the time, everyone in Israel had been issued a gas mask, which came in a box with a carrying strap. Many people had decorated their boxes, treating the masks as accessories rather than stark reminders of potential danger. As we entered the airport terminal, there was no panic. But there was a scramble toward the pile of gas masks because many of the 300 or so passengers were determined to reclaim their very own mask.

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In 1991, I moved from Israel to Asia thanks to a one-year fellowship from the Henry Luce Foundation. My goal was to spend the year in China, and together with the foundation, we crafted a proposal for me teach journalism at Beijing University. It was just two years after the Chinese government had crushed the student and pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square. China was warily opening back up, and I wanted to jump in. But just weeks before I was to arrive, the government got cold feet and denied me a visa. It was one thing to let foreigners report for distant audiences, but apparently it was too soon to let a Western journalist poison the minds of Chinese students.

It was disappointing, but I did my best to keep an open mind, and I took my fallback fellowship posting in Hong Kong, writing for a magazine called the Far Eastern Economic Review. (Coincidentally, the daughter of one of my colleagues there is now an Exeter student.) I quickly realized that I had cultural hurdles to overcome in winning the trust of some Chinese. It had nothing to do with my demeanor, personality or line of questioning. It had everything to do with my appearance. Specifically, my eyebrow.

You may have noticed that I have just one. A monobrow to some, a unibrow to others, it was my mark of distinction at Exeter, and the butt of lighthearted jokes among friends, including Ashok. That era is permanently etched into my senior year's yearbook. I had only two schoolmates sign it, and one of them was a budding cartoonist who accompanied his comments about my eyebrow with a caricature.

Well, among the Chinese, my eyebrow took on broader significance, and gave me a prism through which to seek insight into the cultures of a new part of the world in my professional journey.

On an assignment that involved interviewing fortune tellers at Wong Tai Sin temple in Hong Kong, I was overwhelmed by their fascination with physiognomy – physical attributes. These diviners had mapped and diagrammed virtually every facial and body feature, along with their significance in terms of character and personality. I had gone to the temple with the magazine's administrative assistant, Winnie, as my interpreter. As we made the rounds, I noticed that I wasn't getting too many smiles. She inquired and came back with the bad news. The distance between one's eyebrows, she relayed earnestly, indicated the openness of one's mind. So I wondered: Was my mind closed? Or, figuratively speaking, did I not have a mind at all? I never got a verdict on that from the psychics.

Around that time, I went to Taiwan for a month to work. A bit grittier than Hong Kong, Taiwan was just emerging from years of military rule, and bursting with youthful, creative energy in everything from business to the arts. And in terms of my eyebrow, the Taiwanese were more overt in their interest. I couldn't enter a restaurant without stares followed by huddles of people speaking in hushed voices. I would see people glancing at me and then gesturing to each other by running a finger across their foreheads just above their eyes. In barber shops, the staff made my eyebrow the topic of office banter and frequently took the liberty of touching it – without asking. One night in a taxi in Taipei, I noticed the driver peeking at me repeatedly in the rear view mirror. After a while, I asked him if something was wrong.

"Your eyebrow," he replied in pretty good English.

"What about it," I said, bracing.

"To us Chinese, it's a mark of evil, of a bad man," he said.

I thought to myself: Compared to the Hong Kong interpretation, this might actually be an improvement. But before I could say anything, the taxi driver – perhaps not wanting to offend a paying passenger – went on:

"But don't worry. *You're* not Chinese."

I don't recall if I gave him a bigger tip for that clarification.

So, armed with eyebrow interpretations from two Chinese communities, I ventured to the mainland itself. Despite the vast cultural – and linguistic – differences between the north and south, I found one thing in common: locals were much more relaxed about and less interested in my eyebrow than their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan had been. Yes, nearly half a century of Communist rule had sought to snuff out religion and so-called "traditional" cultural pursuits, like fortune telling. But, plenty of superstition survived underground or out of reach of the morality police, so that really didn't explain the difference. I never uncovered the truth about what mainlanders thought about my eyebrow, but the fact that it was a non-factor helped me understand a pragmatism that was driving China forward at tremendous speed.

It was breathtaking to watch, it was history unfolding. I felt like I needed to visit Beijing every six months or I wouldn't recognize the city. New highway overpasses, giant new hotels and office buildings, more telephone lines being laid in a year than the U.S. was laying in a decade. A labor force of 100 million people that floated around the country looking for work – all taking trains home to their villages for Chinese New Year! As I had done in the Soviet Union, I took a long train ride through China, a trip that revealed hardscrabble cities in the interior, glimpses of the human toll and injustices resulting from this top down march to modernity.

At the time, I recall being impressed by the way the modern China and traditional China coexisted within individuals. Toward the end of my first year in Hong Kong, the Far Eastern Economic Review got a new editor. Winnie, the office assistant who had translated for me at the fortune-telling temple, told me after her first meeting with him that he was very smart. I knew that he had been a Rhodes Scholar, but she had conveyed her favorable impression so confidently that I was curious as to what tipped her off about his brainpower.

"I can tell because he has a high forehead," Winnie said.

I couldn't resist that invitation. I turned squarely to her and pushed my hair up to expose my forehead. "What about me," I asked?

Winnie studied me for a moment, then said: "Nice Eyebrow."

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When I moved to India, facial hair no longer made me an evil, closed-minded oddity. In that respect, I felt right at home. But if the Chinese had impressed me with compartmentalizing their modern and traditional sides, Indians blew me away. They could live in the here-and-now during business hours as computer programmers but revert to centuries-old customs of arranged marriages or extended-family homes in the off hours.

India was feast for the senses, a jumble of contradictions. It was as complicated and as interesting an assignment as they come. As in Israel, every day seemed to turn on life and death issues. And with that, came the challenge of keeping my distance and trying to discern the truth about whether India was improving the lot of its billion people.

It was hard to feel that was the case when a farmer's widow threw herself upon my feet begging for help as villagers urged her to sell her son into bondage to begin paying off the family's debt. That would have brought

her the princely sum of $80 a year. This occurred in 1998, several years after India cast off a closed economy that was controlled by the federal government in New Delhi, and gradually opened up to freer trade and enterprise.

I had gone to southern India to look into a spate of suicides by cotton farmers whose crop had been devoured by caterpillars. What made the desperation so compelling – in a country that has seen its share of disasters – was that it took place in a state that was home to Indian politicians at the forefront of the economic reforms. Outside of the state's gleaming capital city, much of the population was trapped in a feudal time warp, with little chance of advancement.

For the record, I didn't help the widow directly. But my story on the cotton farmers' plight prompted readers to donate thousands of dollars in aid.

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It's always difficult to write about hardship and misery. But they are still a big part of the world we live in. And, every story that exposes the human condition in the proper perspective is a step toward truth.

I believe that my experience at Exeter – from assignments like the reporter-at-large to my interactions with a diverse group of students – helped me develop journalistic tools and planted a desire to go off and see the world. And sure enough, Paul Klebnikov did his part to egg me on.

I have already mentioned one of the two people who signed my last Exeter yearbook. Paul was the other. After teasing me about a future in politics he wrote, in classic Paul lingo: "Don't get bogged down in a conformity bag just for security or pursue some kind of material gains.

Following others or being part of a system will only stifle you. To be great is to follow yourself and the things you believe in – only."

Very true indeed.