

The New York Times goes on the road in Kazakhstan

Journalism master classes reflect spirit of Helsinki



The long road from Helsinki to the windswept steppes of Central Asia took me almost three decades to travel. As a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, I had covered the creation in 1975 of what is now the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Thanks to the OSCE, I found myself in the back room of a small restaurant in Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan, in December 2004, teaching a score of enthusiastic local journalists the basics of Western-style reporting and news-writing.

BY CHRISTOPHER S. WREN

The OSCE has become a family affair. My son, Chris, a trial lawyer in New York City, worked during his law-school vacation in 1997 as an election monitor for the OSCE in the Bosnian city of Brcko. So it seemed logical that after retiring from nearly 29 years at *The Times*, I should sign on as a media consultant and trainer for the OSCE in Kazakhstan, which belonged to the Soviet Union when I first visited it as bureau chief in Moscow.

On another trip to Kazakhstan for the Washington-based International Center for Journalists in 2003, I met Beata Martin-Rozumilowicz, political and media officer at the OSCE Centre in Almaty. She invited me to conduct a series of master classes for young Kazakhstani journalists.

I developed a two-day intensive seminar in reporting and editing and took it to 10 cities and towns around Kazakhstan from February to December 2004: Astana, Atyrau, Aktau, Aktobe, Karagandy, Kostanai, Kokshetau, Kyzylorda, Shymkent and Oral. Ian MacWilliam, a correspondent for the BBC in Almaty, held similar master classes in five other cities. Nine of the 15 classes were funded by the Delegation of the United Kingdom to the OSCE.

The Helsinki Final Act, which I reported on from the Finnish capital in 1975, pledged the signatory nations to encourage such exchanges of experience between experts in

the press, radio and television. "The master class," one of my students in Astana wrote afterwards, "reminded me how important it is not to forget the basic principles upon which the profession of a journalist is based."

Although I have taught at Princeton University and Dartmouth College in the United States, I made it clear that I had come to Kazakhstan as a colleague, sharing the knowledge that I had accumulated during 40 years as a working journalist.

"Not everything would work here," one of the participants demurred. I agreed. I invited them to challenge, modify or discard anything I said, because we Americans had no monopoly on the truth. I didn't care what they wrote, I said, but I wanted them to learn to do it well.

The idea behind the master classes was to hone the professional skills of journalists, most of whom are still trying to overcome the legacy of the old Soviet Union, which taught journalists to function as propagandists. This role has changed in Kazakhstan, but many journalism schools haven't. A developing democracy needs an independent media, not just to help citizens make informed choices but also to function as a watchdog against official or unofficial misfeasance.

WHIMSICAL RULES

My students complained that their own journalism schools were long on theory and short on practice. "In two days, we have covered a volume of information which would have taken one year at a university," one told me after the master class. Another said she had heard of newspapers like *The New York Times*, but had never seen a copy before I brought some to the master class.

My classes, conducted in Russian with some additional translation into Kazakh,

Master class participants with
The New York Times.
Photo: Tanya Bogusevich/
Centre in Almaty

stressed some whimsical rules: “There is no such thing as a stupid question.” “Three secrets of satisfying your reader are to explain, explain and explain.” “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”

We discussed how to write compelling headlines and how to employ numbers and statistics in such a way that the reader could understand them. I offered some tips on conducting a productive interview. We tried brainstorming to think up better ideas for stories.

I sketched out the distinction that American journalists make between reporting, analysis and opinion. I distributed more advice in the form of handouts translated into Russian. We wound up debating the ethics of journalism and examples of dilemmas confronting reporters around the world.

Some students said they most liked the ethical discussions, while others preferred the practical applications. They peppered me with questions about journalism in the United States. “What can’t you write?” one wanted to know. I explained that Americans were fortunate to have a constitution that enshrined freedom of the press, which left us free to range from the worst to the best.

Asked to compare journalists in Kazakhstan with their Western peers, I replied that Kazakhstani had to work harder to pry out the same amount of information. It was more revealing, I added, to compare journalists in Kazakhstan with their predecessors in the Soviet Union, because today they were so vastly superior.

At our final master class in Astana, Ambassador Ivar Vikki, Head of the OSCE Centre in Almaty, stopped by and addressed the students in flawless Russian. Vikki, a gracious career diplomat from Norway, stayed for lunch and returned that evening to award the certificates of completion.

LARGER STORY

Did the master classes make any real difference? I would point to the evaluations that we asked the participants to fill out, to learn what we could do better. “I’ve heard a lot of useful things and obtained answers to questions that I’ve wanted to ask for a long time,” said one participant in Astana. Another said, “The seminar reminded me

it’s very important to be professional.”

There were only a few complaints. The participants mostly regretted that the master classes did not run longer than the two days allocated for each city. When I showed them how to pick apart a sample press release to find the larger story, one journalist protested, “We’re not allowed to do that. We have to publish what we are given.” “But,” I replied, “now you’ll know how to do it whenever you can.” Another asked about investigative reporting, which I



said was nothing more than painstaking in-depth reporting.

While I tended to speak about newspapers, more than a few participants came from radio and television outlets. “Because I work for television, I was slightly discouraged at first, but then I got very interested,” one correspondent said. “It is not important whether you work for a newspaper or television,” I replied. “What is most important is that you are a journalist, and the basic principles in our work are common for all.”

The warmth of the responses startled me. In Kyzylorda, students queued up to get my autograph, making me feel like a rock star. But they were as thrilled to meet one another and to swap e-mail addresses so they could keep in touch. “It was nice to realize that we have much in common,” a young man said.

The OSCE has loftier roles to play in security concerns, economic co-operation and the high-visibility monitoring of elections. But the master classes for journalists also reflect the letter and the spirit of the original Helsinki Final Act of 1975. At least I think so, because I was there too.

Christopher S. Wren worked for *The New York Times* for almost three decades, living 17 years abroad as a foreign correspondent. He was chief of the *Times* news bureaus in Moscow, Cairo, Beijing, Ottawa and Johannesburg, and later covered the United Nations. As a Knight International Press Fellow, he spent six months in St. Petersburg, training journalists, and recently assisted independent newspapers in five Russian provincial cities.





Polish media professionals share expertise

More than 350 junior journalists, aged 18 to 25, completed one of the 15 master classes held all across Kazakhstan in 2004. The best 15 participants from the regions were sent on a two-week professional internship in Poland, where they toured newsrooms and radio and television stations and exchanged views with leading local journalists. The internship programme was made possible through a partnership between the OSCE Centre in Almaty and the Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity Foundation, with the assistance of the Polish Embassy in Kazakhstan.

Learning from Poland.

Junior journalists in Atyrau realize “unattainable dream”

By Iliya Agayev

There was not a single empty seat at a two-day seminar for budding journalists in Atyrau, known as the “oil capital of Kazakhstan” (Note that my country has many capitals!). Not too many young people are involved in journalism in this western city of 200,000, so the level of attendance was a major achievement in itself. What’s more, the seminar organizers managed to draw in journalism students from the local university. Most of them, including the most senior, have had extremely limited theoretical and even less practical training.

Thanks to the fairly large media market and the relatively frequent training sessions and seminars in Almaty and Astana, Kazakhstan’s old and new capital cities, junior reporters somehow manage to develop their skills and supplement the knowledge acquired at university.

However, for the overwhelming majority of their colleagues in the other regions, participation in events of this kind remains an unattainable dream, and they are forced to make do with what little is on offer locally. Since the most talented regional journalists usually seek work in the capital cities, their young, aspiring colleagues from the provinces often have no one to look up to from whom they can gain experience.

Christopher Wren, our principal trainer, is a journalist with some three decades’ worth of experience working under the most varied and difficult conditions. However, skills alone, even the very best, are often not enough to make someone an effective teacher. What is also required is a special talent to enable the trainer to pass on knowledge in a way that is accessible to beginners.

This is exactly where Mr. Wren was at his best. An excellently structured programme, training modules that

took into account the primary needs of neophyte reporters, accessible language, a willingness to answer questions, and finally, practical assignments designed to consolidate the knowledge conveyed — these were the elements that made the seminar so special.

What was particularly important was that the trainer had an excellent understanding of the situation concerning journalism in the post-Soviet environment. Because of his previous work in the old Soviet Union, he was able to compare journalism then and now.

I believe it is fair to say that the two-day seminar in Atyrau was a notable event in the professional life of the region’s up-and-coming journalists like myself.

Iliya Agayev, 22, took part in the pilot master class for young journalists organized by the OSCE Centre in Almaty in February 2004. He now works for the Epokha weekly newspaper in Almaty.



Journalists examine a newspaper with a critical eye.



Thirty years ago in *The New York Times*

Christopher S. Wren was part of a team of *New York Times* correspondents who filed detailed and analytical articles from Helsinki over several days in the summer of 1975. They were among the hordes of journalists who descended on the Finnish capital to report on one of the biggest stories of

the post-Second World War period: the historic Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and the signing of the “Final Act”, a 30,000 word document which is widely considered to have contributed to the end of East-West confrontation and to have provided impetus for democratic change that led to the end of the Cold War. Following are excerpts from Mr. Wren’s human-interest news coverage, reproduced with his permission.

Helsinki greets visitors and guards them well.

HELSINKI, July 29 — Stringent security measures intruded on the easy-going pace of this small capital today, as national leaders arrived from throughout Europe and North America for the summit-level conclusion of the 35-nation European Security Conference.

Finland is host to the three-day session, which opens tomorrow, with every nation in Europe except Albania participating, plus the United States and Canada. The meeting brings to a close nearly three years of wide-ranging negotiations that opened here, and then moved to Geneva.

The largest security operation in Finnish history has been mounted to forestall any difficulty prompted by the gathering of so many leaders.

Helsinki’s 1,600-man police force has been augmented by reinforcements summoned from as far away as Lapland above the Arctic Circle. The size of the security force has been estimated at 3,000 to 5,000 men.

The tightest security was thrown around the railway station before Mr. [Leonid I.] Brezhnev’s arrival at 2.30 p.m. The stone building was cordoned off and policemen could be seen silhouetted on its roof as the 16-car special train pulled in.

A few shop-windows displayed portraits of visiting leaders and President [Urho] Kekkonen. Stockmann’s department store was selling T-shirts embossed with the initials and emblem of the European conference.

Behind the scenes, active negotiations.

HELSINKI, July 30 — In between solemn public pledges to improve East-West relations, the leaders of government assembled here are trading tough language in private on the problems of Europe.

While face-to-face meetings called “bilaterals” in diplomatic parlance do not appear on the formal schedule of the European security conference, they are providing the most substantive exchanges.

This evening, the West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt conferred for the first time with East German party chief, Erich Honecker, in a meeting that, for all its

lack of tension, was little short of historic.

After an encounter between the Soviet leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, and President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing of France, a French official disclosed that Mr. Giscard d’Estaing would pay a formal visit to the Soviet Union in mid-October. It is in return for the visit Mr. Brezhnev made to France last December.

Amid all the high-level exchanges, President Urho Kekkonen, who is host for the conference, offered a Finnish variation of the bilateral by inviting [Hungarian leader] Mr. [Janos] Kadar to join him in a sauna.

Curtain falls softly at Helsinki parley.

HELSINKI, Aug. 1 — The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe ended today with a whisper of pens as the ranking representatives of 35 assembled states, from superpowers to pocket nations, signed the pages of a huge document worked out over the last two years.

President Tito of Yugoslavia had doffed his vanilla-colored suit for something more somber. But Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau of Canada bucked the pattern of formality by showing up in a modish tan summer suit with his usual red carnation.

The actual signing took only 17 minutes as Joel Pekuri, the Finn who has been executive secretary of the conference, passed a blue-bound docu-

ment the size of a telephone directory down the long line. There was sustained applause from the delegates in the chamber and a few newsmen peering down from the balcony.

In a rare departure, the Italian Premier, Aldo Moro, after signing his name, added by hand, “and President of the European Economic Community”. The gesture resulted from a decision by the nine Common Market countries to note their appearance as a bloc, notwithstanding the Russians’ unwillingness to recognize the situation.

President Urho Kekkonen of Finland, in declaring the conference closed, expressed the hope that the document would be “the foundation of and guideline for our future relations and their further development.”



Leonid I. Brezhnev, General-Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, signs the Helsinki Final Act on 1 August 1975. Turkey's Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel looks on. (OSCE photo)