Cultural Daily

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In Conversation with Tom Teicholz

Fred Schruers · Wednesday, February 15th, 2017

Fred Schruers (@fschruers) and Tom Teicholz (@tomteicholz), journalists who've written for most major and many, many minor publications host the weekly podcast "The Buried Lede: Decoding the Media Narrative." Here, Fred interviews Tom about his latest book, "Being There: Journalism 1978-2000" (Rare Bird Lit/A Vireo Book) which features articles about writers and artists at the start of their career (Jeff Bridges, Roz Chast, Ian Frazier), current masters (Tom McGuane, Cynthia Ozick) and those no longer with us (Jerzy Kosinski, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bill Graham) as well as essays and excerpts about Reagan's trip to Bitburg and a Nazi War Crimes trial in Jerusalem. (The following is an edited version of their conversation.)

Fred Schruers: I want to start with Jerzy Kosinski [author of the novels *The Painted Bird* and *Being There*], who lived an insane life and you seem to know every little tidbit of it. What was he like in the room?

Tom Teicholz: Kosinski, in person, was much more handsome than the angular, bird-like figure in his photos, and he was probably the most charming person you could imagine having lunch with or talking to.

He really knew how to seduce, entertain, and manipulate his audience, whether that audience was Henry Kissinger or a journalist writing a story about him. There would be a thank you note afterwards mailed to you and, later, a postcard. He gave me limited edition essays he'd written. He was really … I think Phillip Roth said that Jerzy Kosinski was his greatest creation.

Fred Schruers: He lived what you could call a traumatic early life.

Tom Teicholz: For many years he was coy and let people believe that *The Painted Bird* was his own experience. It may have been a metaphorical truth, but it was uncovered later on that he spent most of the war years living not as a child on the run in the countryside seeing horrific [things] but rather quite comfortably under false papers having to lie to stay alive.

Fred Schruers: When did he die?

Tom Teicholz: Kosinski committed suicide in the early '90s and it was quite tragic, because it really did leave his estate and his legacy in a mess.

For someone as controlling as Kosinski, I believe he committed suicide because he wanted to control his end of life and didn't want to be in a diminished physical or medical condition, which he imagined he was going to be in. I don't think it's exactly proven or known whether his fears were justified.

Fred Schruers: It's a big picture question as to how art and madness sometimes intertwine. How much was genetic? How much was from whatever trauma he did suffer?

Tom Teicholz: Far be it from me to be Kosinski's psychoanalyst. That being said, there's no question that his flights of fancy, and in fact, his life, which led him from Lodz, Poland to New York to the Academy Awards, where he presented the Best Screenplay Oscar and was nominated for *Being There*, and appeared as an actor in the film *Reds* — Is it right to say that he had moments of grandiosity when in fact he did have quite grand moments? So, that being said, I do think when all is said and done, *The Painted Bird* and *Being There* will continue on.

Fred Schruers: Let's turn to Hollywood a little bit and talk about Jeff Bridges. As the title of your piece would indicate, he's so much about family.

Tom Teicholz: It's really funny. Jeff Bridges was one of the first interviews I did for *Interview Magazine* and one of the first interviews I ever did period, and he was at the start of his career. He'd only done a couple of movies, but the funny thing is, is if you read that interview, it's like you're talking to him now. The same Jeff Bridges that was present there is present now.

The kind of guy, who, when he's doing a movie is a hundred percent on that movie and when he's not doing that movie he's kicking back and expansive, and the kind of ethics that he's come to embody with *The Big Lebowski*, that's kind of become sort of how we think of Jeff Bridges. That personality was completely present then, and the way he talks quite lovingly of both his parents and his brother and growing up, again, remains true to the person he is today.

Fred Schruers: It's funny, here he is nominated once again. He's our generation's guy, which probably ages us. I want to go into the Russ Meyer interview for a minute, because he's a pretty frank interview. He identified breast sizes to you as "Big, bigger, and best," right?

Tom Teicholz: Yeah. Big, bigger, breasts, would be more apropos. The editor of *Interview Magazine*, Gael Love, was someone who loved the idea of an interview with Russ Meyer. Meyer was the auteur of soft porn, or hard R, or soft R by today's standard — films as *Vixen*, which he made for almost no money and went on to gross tens of millions of dollars, and *Supervixens*; films which gave bands their name, like *Faster Pussycat Kill Kill*; and, of course, his one studio film, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, which is also famous because its screenwriter was the film critic Roger Ebert.

Fred Schruers: Yes!

Tom Teicholz: Russ was quite a character and I went to meet him in what was both his office and a film location. It was an A frame house just below the Hollywood sign that looked to the person pulling up the street like a A-frame Swiss chalet, and in fact even had a affixed to the front, a two-star Relais & Chateau sign.

When you walked into the building, walked into the place, there was a conventional house, except that in each room– the living room, the bedrooms, the kitchens– were beds. On the wall Russ had

put awards like you might have for a child who won their most improved camper or soccer tournament trophy.

His awards commemorated, this is a direct quote, “The joyous exchange of bodily fluids,” between him and some of his stars, like Kitten Natividad. It was quite funny.

Russ was quite charming and he told an anecdote, which has since been much quoted, which I believe I broke, which is that he got his start both in film and in the introduction to the world of sex because he was a film photographer who was attached to the US Army on D-Day.

He followed the US forces as they made their way towards Paris. Just outside of Paris they were bivouacked for a few days. While he was there he met Ernest Hemingway …

Fred Schruers: Jeez…

Tom Teicholz: … who was also a reporter following the American army, and Hemingway recommended to Meyer that he go to this brothel outside of Paris where Meyer lost his virginity.

Fred Schruers: Wow, small world.

Tom Teicholz: So, he liked to claim that Hemingway was the cause of his losing his virginity.

Then, when you concluded the tour of Russ’s home, you ended up in his garage where he had stacked DVDs, not DVDs, VHS cassettes, because that was the format of the time, floor-to-ceiling with his movies, which he personally mailed out to people who ordered them.

Fred Schruers: Of course. It’s a little mom and pop business–but just pop. While we’re talking about women of perhaps less than impeccable moral fiber, *Road Chicks*. What a shame not to see that published at the time. But now it’s in print, so everybody’s happy. Talk about it as a journalistic saga. It looks like a lot of work went into that.

Tom Teicholz: Ian Brown, who has been a guest on The Buried Lede (our weekly podcast), and who is one of the most celebrated journalists, and I met at the Radcliffe publishing program in the summer of 1985. While I was there, there was a young woman who had attended a southern women’s college who liked to regale both Ian and myself with stories of her time there.

What struck me at the time was that here were these women’s colleges whose stated aim was to teach women to be self-sufficient and independent, and not distracted by men, and not have to in any way demean themselves, who, as a result of attending women’s colleges, were forced on the weekend to travel to men’s colleges where they were completely demeaned by the experiences they endured there.

Ian and I pitched this to *Rolling Stone* that we would like to go and travel to these colleges. We spent two weekends in the fall of 1985 hanging out and traveling around with a group of women at these women’s colleges and wrote the story that became *Road Chicks*, which I always felt was a story about Reagan America, about women taking ownership and empowering themselves against the demeaning forces of men’s fraternities at men’s colleges.

But again, given the Billy Bush/Donald Trump comments, that kind of locker room talk and locker room behavior has not disappeared.

Fred Schruers: So things haven't really changed.

Tom Teicholz: The tremendous attendance at the Women's March is testament to the extent to which even today women need to fight for their rights. So, I hope that *Road Chicks*, which to me is very much *Animal House*, or *School Daze*, but the female version, I hope that it finds a home in today's media landscape.

Fred Schruers: Talk about Michael Milken for a minute, because here was someone who reached the heights of his career in finance, then suffered a fall from grace, and then returned to a kind of grace. What was the degree of self-justification and how would you assess his state of happiness? How does one have a second act?

Tom Teicholz: This was the first piece that Milken did when he got out of prison, and it broke the story that he had prostate cancer and that he had a battle with prostate cancer. It was for the *Sunday Times Magazine*.

I spent about 12 to 15 hours on four occasions interviewing Milken and at that time he'd been told that his chance of surviving for more than two years were not great, but he had had his [radiation] treatments and he was in remission.

He knew that if he survived two years, he stood a good chance of surviving five. If he survived five, he had a good chance of surviving 10. But nothing was certain, and he still was on parole and had to do community service, and he had gone to prison. That was in 1993. Now, we're in 2017, and he's still in remission and he actually has spent the last 25 years doing a lot of good.

None of that was known at the time but what I did experience was a person who, in many ways, had genius qualities. His ability to understand markets and see patterns in financial markets, in stocks, in businesses, in the tax system, was kind of savant-like.

At the same time there were ways in which I was shocked by how little he understood of publicity, talking to a journalist, things he should be saying and not saying, and the ways in which he thought every movie he saw at that moment was about him in some way. There were blind spots that he had that kind of surprised me.

That being said, what I did come away feeling was that he was someone who really wanted to be liked and really wanted to be perceived as someone who was doing good or making the world better or helping people. And that to the extent that he got himself in trouble, it was in part because he wanted to be liked by people like an Ivan Boesky or a Steve Ross, or others. The way that those people would like him or he could be of service to them was by making them money and eliminating the risk in their investments, which caused him to cross the line.

Now, that doesn't excuse the fact that he did cross the line and that in some of his business dealings he did, although legally, enrich himself or his family members in ways that might have been overreaching. It doesn't excuse any of that but, to some extent, it does explain it.

Fred Schruers: Let me ask this tortured analogy. You had Nixon, bad, then you have Trump, far worse. You had Milken, somewhat bad, then you had Bernie Madoff, far worse.

Tom Teicholz: You know what? You can't sit around and engage in comparative ethics or comparative morality. I think that kind of exercise diminishes the conversation.

I think in each case you just have to say, “Did they break the law?” If the answer is yes, then they broke the law. You don’t have to go further than that. I think you can, again, in each case think of them as human beings, and as human beings you may try and have understanding or empathy but that doesn’t excuse what they did.

In terms of the question you asked before about redemption or rehabilitation, again, I think you have to look to their actions and ask yourself, did they A) Admit their wrongs? B) Have they done acts of contrition that show that they in any way have remorse or regret, and then C) Have they done good deeds as a consequence? I think in each of those examples you’ll yield different results.

Fred Schruers: Throughout your career you’ve written about Jewish identity and Holocaust remembrance. Are you discouraged about the current resurgence of anti-Semitism or Holocaust denial?

Tom Teicholz: I remember in 2000 really thinking that whatever anti-Semitism existed, it was completely different in kind than what existed in the 20th century and that we had turned a corner in some way; and that institutional state sponsored anti-Semitism was gone.

In many ways I thought that in America and most of the world, Jews were no longer barred from professions, or clubs, or swimming pools, or whatever, and I thought that … I was ready to say that as we had more and more generations of Jews who were assimilated into countries all over the world, they changed and the world had changed.

However, as Primo Levi once said, history proved otherwise. In 2002 Daniel Pearl was murdered in Pakistan, and although I didn’t realize it at the time, two or three years later I was interviewing Bernard Henri Levy who said to me that he thought the murder of Daniel Pearl was a signal event, a hinge event in the recurrence of worldwide anti-Semitism as much as the trial of Dreyfus was in the 20th century.

Fred Schruers: L’affaire Dreyfus.

Tom Teicholz: And, unfortunately, I think he’s right. I think we’ve seen a resurgence of anti-Semitism, in nature and kind, in its acceptance and its casual use, in places we never imagined it would reappear.

Fred Schruers: Interestingly, Daniel Pearl was a journalist, but his murderers made of his Jewish identity a stand-in for millions.

Tom Teicholz: Yes. Daniel Pearl, both as a person and with regard to his murder being a hinge event, was, yes, Jewish, but he was very assimilated and his whole life was about outreach to others. He was a reporter in Pakistan specifically because he was interested in the Muslim world and he was a musician who played music as a way to connect cultures. His whole life was really about embracing the other.

The fact that when his kidnappers discovered he was Jewish they basically sold him off to Khalid Sheik Mohammed’s people, who then made him record a video before his death where he was forced to say that he’s Jewish, that he’s the child of parents who are Jewish, who’s father was born in Israel, where in Israel there’s a street named after his grandfather. All that is not about Daniel Pearl himself so much as how they viewed Jews and Judaism in the world and how they wanted to use it politically. That in and of itself tells us that political anti-Semitism is back in a way that I

thought had disappeared.

Fred Schruers: How does that relate to some of the other pieces in “Being There” such as your letter to the *New York Times* about the Holocaust dead, or to covering the Demjanjuk trial?

Tom Teicholz: I think this relates very much to what you were saying about looking at Nixon and Madoff and other people, and how we think and write about them.

The problem one faces when writing about events related to the Holocaust as I did in my book about the Demjanjuk trial in Jerusalem, the Nazi war crimes trial in Jerusalem, or when I wrote an op-ed piece protesting President Reagan’s visit to the cemetery in Bitburg where Nazis were buried, or when I wrote a letter to the *New York Times* correcting something that they had said about the Holocaust dead …

What I think is that we have to honor the specificity and the uniqueness of the event. I think we have to be humble enough before this event to say, “You know what? We don’t understand it. We can never fully understand it. It’s not a teaching tool. It’s not a story with a happy ending. It’s not a story that we’re going to use in order to teach a lesson. It is a unique event and because it occurred we may choose and we should choose to behave differently in the face of other events, but we’re not going to compare its victims to other historical events or other tragedies or crimes, and we’re not going to use it as a justification for one thing or another, but we are going to pledge ourselves to hope that “never again” has meaning.

So, when the *New York Times* wants to describe the perpetrators of Nazi war crimes as being included among the Holocaust dead, we’re going to say, “No, the Holocaust dead is an exclusive club — by the perpetrators’ own intention.”

Similarly, when President Trump, in his Holocaust Day, message wants to widen the ambit of who we’re commemorating as the Holocaust dead, as if the extermination of the Jews during that event was not a unique event, we have to speak out against it.

Fred Schruers: Yeah. You used the word specificity. The life John Demjanjuk lived was very specifically evil. People say, “I was following orders,” but it took one guy standing there on the ground in a camp deciding, “I’m going to be this man.”

Tom Teicholz: You have to ask yourself when we uncover a criminal, no matter what the crime is, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to say, “Ah, you’re old?” There is a concept of mitigation in the law, which is to say that if you shoot someone and you’re brought to trial for it you might say, “Well, I shot him in self-defense.”

Fred Schruers: Sure.

Tom Teicholz: You admit that you committed the crime, but your excuse, your reason for doing so makes it such that you’re not convicted for the crime.

Fred Schruers: Or a lesser sentence.

Tom Teicholz: Or given a lesser sentence.

Fred Schruers: Right, or are you temporarily crazy?

Tom Teicholz: Right, so if we discover a criminal we have to prosecute them. If that criminal in turn, first admits their crime, second gives us reason for mitigation and three, as we said before, provides evidence of their regret, remorse, and good deeds, we're going to treat it completely differently.

In the case of John Demjanjuk, to be specific, to the day of his death he never admitted anything. He refused to admit anything. He expressed no regret or remorse and he gave no reason or excuse for why he may have done what in fact he was proved to have done, which is to be an experienced camp guard in a Nazi extermination camp.

Fred Schruers: Let's talk about the memoir aspect before we wrap up: New York in the late 70s and '80s. Here's the thing that gets to me as a journalist. Was I paying full attention then? Could I have written more pieces? Why didn't we realize it was magic to be in CBGB? We knew it was. We felt it as kids almost, but do you ever look back and go, "Damn, I wish I had done even more documentation?"

Tom Teicholz: The truth is that in the late '70s and '80s, when we were living those lives in New York, there actually were a lot of journalists covering it. There were five guys at the *SoHo Weekly News* and another five at the *Village Voice*.

Fred Schruers: And at *Punk Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*.

Tom Teicholz: And what I said to myself was, "Am I going to write about this when Legs McNeil is covering it? Am I going to cover the gay club scene better than Michael Musto?

Fred Schruers: Right. "Am I working at The Strand with Tom Verlaine?"

Tom Teicholz: Yeah, exactly, or Patti Smith at Scribner's. So, yes, we were living it, and yes people were writing about it. We didn't know that there would be less and less places covering this world or that they would all disappear.

I do want to say, what was fun for me in putting together this collection is the breadth of it. We're all complex people who've had a lot of different experiences. I am fortunate enough that I could hang out both in the Warhol world and yet find myself in Jerusalem covering a Nazi war crimes trial. I sort of see myself in a tradition of journalists who cover whatever beat is in front of them and enjoy doing so.

I am a much lesser version, but I've always aspired to be like Calvin Trillin who could cover the civil rights movement in the South in the '60s, write about murder cases and murder trials throughout America, and still write the most entertaining, funniest pieces about food and eating.

Again, I'm really happy that I could find a silly conversation with Phoebe Cates on the day that *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* came out and pieces with Bill Graham, and also serious pieces as well.

Fred Schruers: I think that's a great summary. Wrap it up?

Tom Teicholz: Thanks, Fred.

Fred Schruers: Thank you.

Top photo: Tom Teicholz.

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