



Danny Pearl Case Isn't Yet Closed For Journalists

by Ron Rosenbaum

Maybe it's time to think about Daniel Pearl again. Not merely because he represents a different aspect of journalism, let's say, than the one that has come in for so much attention lately. Not merely because he represents the very best and bravest. But because, in certain ways, the Daniel Pearl case is not closed.

'If Daniel Pearl was onto something, we've got a problem that [isn't] being addressed.'

For one thing, the man convicted of kidnapping and killing him in Pakistan in February 2002, a British-educated radical Islamist called Ahmed Omar Sheikh, apparently has managed to find a way to delay the imposition of justice for the past year since his trial. According to a source close to the case, the convicted murderer's attorney has adopted the tactic of repeatedly scheduling appeal hearings and then failing to show up for them, thus constantly postponing resolution of the case. "Justice has *not* been done" in Pakistan, this source told me. (A press attaché at the Pakistani embassy told me the courts there had "remedies" if such conduct was occurring.)

Then there are questions about the crime itself that still have to be resolved, old questions such as: Just what story was Danny Pearl pursuing that led him to risk his life? And new questions have also emerged, about who really gave the order for Daniel Pearl's murder, and about the meanings that have been projected upon his death and upon his final words in the horrific videotape made of his slaughter.

I've resisted writing about Daniel Pearl for a long time, deliberately stayed in a state of denial about the awful details. I've refused to seek out the video of his killing, the entirety of which was once (and may still be) accessible on the Internet.

Perhaps the two are connected: the denial and the refusal. I don't condemn those who believe, in good faith, that it's important to see the bloody footage. I guess there's an argument that it's important to see it to fully apprehend the true face of hatred, the savage malevolence of the ideology that drove the blade into his throat, the perversion of religion that parades before a camera with a severed head.

Conversely, I respect the views of those, such as Judea Pearl, Daniel's father, and Daniel's wife Mariane, who argue that it's wrong to broadcast this ritual murder and wrong to seek it out, because watching it serves the killers' terror agenda—in a sense, watching it does their bidding.

I don't know. I suspect I may, at some time, have to face it. But I'm not hastening that time. And yet, somehow, I think part of me held back from writing about his death without peering into the abyss, the depths of human nature that video represents. But a confluence of recent events—several conversations, communiqués and the like—have convinced me that it's important to write about Danny Pearl, anyway. As a way of helping to preserve his memory and his unique identity, and as a way of pursuing the truth about the circumstances of his death—and honoring the truth he was seeking.

I recall when I was briefly executive-editing a journalism review some years ago (it was called *MORE*), we covered the case of an investigative reporter, Don Bolles, who was murdered in Phoenix for getting too close to the truth about financial and political corruption there. In the aftermath of his death, when it looked like the authorities were not too anxious to get to the bottom (or reach to the top) of it, a task force of investigative reporters from all over America (led by *Newsday's* Bob Greene) descended on the state and investigated the hell out of the story, and made life hell for those behind the murder. (The most important thing, to paraphrase the great Eric Ambler, is not to find the one who fired the gun, but to find the ones who paid for the bullet.) I could be wrong, but I don't recall a similar mobilization after Danny Pearl was killed—although admittedly, Pakistan is a lot more dangerous than Phoenix. (Perhaps American journalists didn't feel entitled to make a special fuss over one of their own when at the time, we were still at war and soldiers were losing their lives every day in Afghanistan.)

But when I learned of the advent of a new book, *Who Killed Danny Pearl?*, by the French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy—a book that offers what its publisher calls "explosive" conclusions, by a writer who devoted a year to investigating the case, retracing Danny Pearl's final footsteps even into the room where he was killed—I decided it was time to pay attention. The Lévy book is likely to make news here. It already has made news abroad upon publication in France last month (*Time's* European edition did a feature on it, as did *The Economist*, which said Mr. Lévy's theory, "If true ... has terrifying implications"). I'm surprised more attention hasn't been paid to it here, although galleys of the English translation will not be available (from Melville House Publishing, Hoboken, N.J.) for another month, and it won't be published here until September.

But even without Mr. Lévy's book, questions about Daniel Pearl seem to have been surfacing recently, questions that range from the forensic and criminal to the political and spiritual.

A couple days after I was alerted to the new book (by my friend Craig Karpel, the journalist and intelligence specialist), I found myself in an animated conversation about the Daniel Pearl case with Thane Rosenbaum. The conversation took place at the launch party for Nextbook, a new endeavor focusing on Jewish books, which my friend Jonathan Rosen is involved with (www.nextbook.org).

I was pleased to finally meet the other Mr. Rosenbaum, since, though he is no relation, we have both written about Holocaust-related subjects (he's the author, most recently, of the novel *The Golems of Gotham*) and, he told me, people occasionally mix us up. Although my Rosenbaums are Hungarian Jews and his are Polish, we speculated about the existence of an ur-Rosenbaum, who—my guess is—drank a lot of coffee.

In any case, the two-Rosenbaum talk soon turned to Daniel Pearl. Thane had been much closer to the case; he'd spoken at a memorial service. He told me about one of the disputes about the meaning projected upon Danny Pearl's death. It has to do with that video and the nature of Danny's final words.

In the video, among the last words Danny Pearl speaks before his throat is cut (apparently it's heavily edited, so they may or may not be the actual last words) are: "I'm a Jewish American. I come from a, on my father's side, a family of Zionists. My father's Jewish. My mother's Jewish. I'm Jewish."

Daniel's father Judea had written a powerful piece, "The Tide of Madness," for *The Wall Street Journal* about his son's death. The Pearl family had set up a sort of foundation to "promote cross-cultural understanding" (www.danielpearl.org) as his legacy. And Judea Pearl wrote, "Danny was killed because he represented us, namely the ideals that every civilized person aspires to uphold" Nevertheless, it is important to remember, he added, that "Danny's captors concentrated on his Jewish and Israeli heritage.... Evidently... Danny's Jewish connections were sufficient to license the gruesome murder..." What it seemed to say to me was that Daniel Pearl may have been kidnapped as a journalist, but he was killed in that ghastly ritual explicitly because he was a Jew.

Thane Rosenbaum told me about the contentions that had grown up about those final words—"I'm Jewish"—and about the way Daniel Pearl's death has been interpreted. There was the question of whether he was reading from a prepared script, or whether he was speaking the words defiantly—or both. (My source close to the case suggests that he was not necessarily defiant, but frank and open about his identity.)

And then there are the arguments over the meanings projected onto the death (and life) of Danny Pearl. Mr. Rosenbaum compared it to the debate over the identity and meaning given to Anne Frank, whose diaries had been edited to make her more a universal symbol and, somehow, a story of hope for the human spirit—an

optimistic interpretation that some (including Cynthia Ozick) have argued was imposed on Anne Frank's more complex, more Jewish identity (and less uplifting narrative) by the editing.

The day following our conversation, at my request, Mr. Rosenbaum—who had lost many family members during the Holocaust, and who has written with grace about descendants of the victims trying to come to grips with that loss—sent me a deeply impassioned piece he'd written on the Daniel Pearl question. One in which he argued that the debate over whether to watch the video obscured a "central point.... Pearl's murder wasn't designed as a simple death." It wasn't, in other words, a generic terrorist crime: "Daniel Pearl's murder had to be recorded and preserved [by his killers] if not for posterity, then as a kind of prurient, hard-porn reminder of the special hate for Jews that animates the consciousness and convictions of his murderers."

He ended the essay with the haunting line: "All Jews are now Daniel Pearl." He could have said that Daniel Pearl was a symbol of all Jews. "All Jews are now Daniel Pearl" is darker, more radical and disturbing, because it almost suggests, by implication, that all Jews will share his fate.

I have to admit: I'd finally met someone with a darker vision than me—and wouldn't you know, he had the same last name. The ur-Rosenbaum, in addition to drinking too much coffee, must have composed despairingly heretical exegeses of the Book of Job in his spare time. (Fortunately, someone with a sense of humor however bleak, seems to have entered the bloodline subsequently.)

The next day, I followed the links Mr. Karpel had sent me about Mr. Lévy's book on the Daniel Pearl case, and ended up talking with Dennis Loy Johnson, the founder of Melville House Publishing. He was guarded about the forthcoming book, although he did send me links to pieces about it in the U.K. *Guardian*, *Time Europe* and *Publisher's Weekly* here. (Melville House, it should be mentioned, is a small New Jersey publishing firm which is best known for having brought out B.R. Myers' critique of contemporary literary stylists, *A Reader's Manifesto*, originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*.)

Melville House got the book, he said, in part because they'd published one of Mr. Lévy's earlier works. From Mr. Johnson and the links he sent me, I gathered that Mr. Lévy, like Mr. Rosenbaum, was also fascinated by the question of Daniel Pearl's final words. That he spent a long opening section of the book on the circumstances under which those words were uttered—and used what might be called Truman Capote-like semi-fictional speculative techniques to put himself inside the mind of the victim and his captors in those moments.

More importantly, in terms of hard news, Mr. Lévy advanced his own theory of why Daniel Pearl was killed: not primarily because he was a Jew, but because of

what he learned as a *journalist*. About the alleged involvement of Pakistani intelligence in the killing, and the consequent unwillingness of either Pakistani or American authorities to pursue this possibility too vigorously for fear of destabilizing the Musharraf government.

Mr. Lévy, for those unfamiliar with him, is an enormously influential popular intellectual in France, whose familiarity with the region dates back to his days as a war correspondent during the India-Pakistan conflict in the 60's. He's known as well for his Camus-like defiance, in the 70's, of the Sartrean consensus on the French left, with his outspoken attacks on the tyranny of the Soviet system. In the 90's he fought for intervention against ethnic cleansing in Serbia and Albania, and recently, although he opposed the Iraq war, has proclaimed himself "anti-anti-American," identifying anti-Americanism with "other filthy genies we have known—fascism, anti-Semitism, nationalism and racism."

In any case, his book may be more important for the attention it refocuses on the Daniel Pearl murder than the specific new solution he proposes—although if he's right, there are serious ramifications to it.

Some charges in his book have been floating around for some time: that Pakistani intelligence (the I.S.I.), or elements of it, had operational ties to Al Qaeda even after 9/11, and that Danny Pearl was murdered because he was pursuing this aspect of the story.

"Lévy concludes," according to the *Time* account, "that [Pearl's] kidnapping, decapitation and dismemberment was essentially a 'crime of state' that implicates parts of the Pakistani government. And it is in Pakistan, he believes, where al-Qaeda's 'madmen of God' mesh with nuclear scientists and intelligence chiefs, that a battle must be joined that will dwarf the controversy over Iraq."

Here's Craig Karpel's preliminary judgment on what might actually be explosive about Lévy's contention: the so-called "Islamic bomb." Pakistan, of course, is already a nuclear power, with an unknown number of nukes at its disposal, and there have been troubling stories about Pakistani nuclear scientists cooperating with Al Qaeda in the past.

"The bottom line," Mr. Karpel wrote me, "is that if BHL is onto something—namely that Daniel Pearl was onto something—and there are indeed Pakistani elements who might be willing to supply al Qaeda or some other Islamist network with not merely a 'dirty nuke' but with a nice, shiny nuke (the kind that can level a city, not just spew a lot of goop), we've got a problem that doesn't appear like it's being addressed." (The Pakistani embassy's press attaché denied any cover-up and told me his government had worked closely with the F.B.I. on the case.)

The Pearl-case source I spoke to had mixed feelings about Mr. Lévy's book. He

said he believed that Danny Pearl had been killed in February 2002 *not* because of what he had learned about Pakistani intelligence, but as Al Qaeda's first retaliation for the American attack in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, he felt that regardless of its specific thesis, the Lévy book might well serve a purpose—particularly in Europe, where "they love Danny Pearl because of his openness and tolerance, but also have residual sympathies for Al Qaeda."

I won't pretend to address all these questions here and now. I'm writing more to alert people that such questions *exist*, that the case is not *closed*, that justice has not been *done*, that a consensus on the truth and meaning of Danny Pearl's death has not been reached.

I guess what I *would* like to address here, however briefly, are two other aspects of the Daniel Pearl story, more about his life than his death. Things which are true whether you think he was killed as a Jew, an American or a reporter who knew too much: his courage and his talent.

In the foreword to his book, *At Home in the World*, a posthumously published collection of his *Wall Street Journal* features, his wife Mariane speaks eloquently of those qualities. And his longtime *Journal* colleague, Helene Cooper, who put the book together, quotes something lovely that Danny's father Judea said at his son's memorial service. About how Danny loved the part of journalism that doesn't come naturally to all of us: "talking to strangers." That he had such an absence of malice, and such an abundance of trust, that strangers welcomed him talking to *them*.

While he was still in Bombay, India, a short while after 9/11, he got a call from a man he'd met before—the man who would engineer his murder, Ahmed Omar Sheikh, apparently posing as a helpful tipster. One can't help but feel that Danny Pearl must have known there was a risk in trusting *this* stranger. He knew him as a militant Islamist with ties to hard-core terror groups. But on the other hand, he was offering information about an important story, one involving the supposed connections of accused "shoe bomber" Richard Reid. So Danny Pearl went to Pakistan anyway. And then, in Pakistan, he got into a car with strangers who did not wish him well.

I don't know—I'm in awe of that kind of courage. It's the answer to people who seize upon the current scandals to make easy attacks on journalists and journalism. Remember: it was Danny Pearl's profession, too.

And he had more than courage: He had a lovely way with words. There's one story in *At Home in the World* that is so perfectly realized, there are many writers who would do anything to have found and captured it.

It's the one about the blind pearl-boat singers of Qatar, the *nahams*, whose songs are reputed to be so piercingly beautiful and sad that it damages them *physically*—many actually go blind. (It sounds like the effect Willie Nelson and Rosanne Cash have on me.) The story is called "These Songs Bring Tears to Your Eyes, or Something Worse."

It was written in 1996, long before the Persian Gulf became a war zone again, with Qatar as it's command post. It was, you might say, a double pearl of a story, Pearl on the pearl-boat singers who accompanied the divers out into the gulf, where they spent months at a time pursuing elusive hidden beauty on the bed of the sea. The pearl-boat singers, vocal prodigies, were said to be essential to inspire the exhausted divers to keep plunging into the deep.

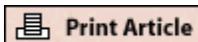
Was it the emotion, the fervor, the unbearable sadness of their songs—of the self-destructive pursuit of beauty itself—that was the cause of their blindness? (Was there a darker, premonitory note in the story, about the destructive power of emotional fervor to blind those in its spell?) Or was it cataracts from the sun blazing on the water that blinded the singers, as some others suggested to Danny Pearl? Like the best writers, Danny Pearl had a talent for what Keats called "negative capability," for allowing the mythic and the mundane theories to co-exist without canceling each other out. The widespread belief in the myth is itself a fact to contend with.

You felt this story had a special blessing because of the names in it. Danny found an academic specialist in pearl-diving songs named, I swear, Scheherazade Q. Hassan! In any case, one can't help but be stopped dead by the final lines of Danny Pearl's story: " ... another theory: maybe blindness actually made the nahams better singers. As an Arab researcher once wrote: 'Isn't it said, that if a nightingale's eyes are popped, its singing will improve?'"

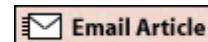
As it says in the title: This story, the whole Danny Pearl story, brings tears to your eyes. Or something worse.

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