

Stan Opotowsky: Finding a Reporter's Vanished Legacy

By JOHN MARTIN

On September 10, 1986, a group of mourners -- reporters and editors --gathered in an auditorium at The New School in Greenwich Village to trade stories about a departed colleague, Paul Sann, a longtime executive editor at the New York Post.

As memories unfolded, Ed Kosner, editor of New York Magazine, recalled a group of "night vagabonds" on the Post's city desk in the 1950s and 1960s. He called them "a very, very odd bunch."

One, identified only as "Opotowsky," was a reporter who "would sometimes be the night city editor."

"He was the only guy," Kosner said, "who could have two cigarettes in his mouth, have his feet up on the desk, and write a story at the same time, faster than anybody else."

Between 1955 and 1965, as a chain-smoking reporter, Stanton (Stan) Opotowsky cut a vivid swath at the New York Post. Later, as city editor and managing editor, he was less memorable -- although far from forgettable.

Nora Ephron, a fledgling Post reporter before she wrote novels and screenplays, once told an interviewer:

"I had an editor there named Stan Opotowsky, and he was always coming up with these great ideas for me. He would say, 'Go out and find the most expensive apartment for rent in New York and report on it!'

"And I thought, 'Oh I'm going to do this forever! I'm never going to want to do anything but this!'"

Jack Robbins, a seasoned Post reporter, said: "He was very easy going, I liked him. On the other hand -- I don't know quite how to put this -- he was just astonishingly terse."



Stan Opotowsky
WW II Correspondent

By the time Myron Rushetzky arrived as a copyboy in 1974, Opotowsky was remembered as well for a fondness for gadgets, among them a corridor-long conveyer belt to deliver baskets of clippings from the Post library to the city desk.

"It was there when I got there but it never worked," said Rushetzky. "They called it 'Opotowsky's folly.'" [Author interview, Feb 24, 2015]

The son of Ukrainian and Polish Jews who emigrated to New Orleans from Paris, Stanton (Stan) Opotowsky wrote sports reports for the Times-Picayune at age 14. Volunteering after his sophomore year at Tulane University, he served as a U.S. Marine combat correspondent in the South Pacific.

After the war, he joined United Press as a sportswriter and married a fellow UP correspondent, Marie Coble. In 1955, he moved to the New York Post, a respected afternoon newspaper that leaned firmly to the left on issues of politics and social justice.

On April 1, 1972, Opotowsky abruptly resigned as managing editor, pushed out by Sann and publisher Dorothy Schiff.

"Morale at the paper was not fabulous," said Marilyn Nissenson, who wrote "The Lady Upstairs: Dorothy Schiff and the New York Post" in 2007.

"I think people recognized that the paper's time had come and gone," she said in an interview. "I think everybody was upset with everybody else."

In a March 11, 1972, memo, Nissenson said, Sann advised Schiff: "I would just tell Stan that he has no future here and we feel it is in the newspaper's interest to reorganize the news operation now."

Opotowsky quickly sent out feelers. Within days of leaving, he joined ABC News and was

Deep Reporting on Ku Klux Klan, White Citizen's Councils

soon promoted to director of its worldwide television news coverage.

Despite what was seen at ABC as a brusque manner, Opotowsky earned a reputation as a boss who cared deeply about his staff.

In April, 1975, as South Vietnam neared defeat, Opotowsky helped orchestrate an operation to evacuate 15 ABC News employees, several former employees, and their extended families.

Calling almost nightly from New York, Opotowsky learned that the numbers seeking rescue were rising steeply as overlooked "sons" and "daughters" were discovered.

Opotowsky "protested that the ABC Board of Directors would not agree to any higher number," recalled Kevin Delaney, the bureau chief. "I would have to point out that we were dealing in human lives. To Stan's credit, he always pushed the higher number through."

Over several days, Delaney escorted a total of 101 Vietnamese to the gates of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, where they argued and bribed their way past Vietnamese MPs to reach the Air America terminal.

"Thank God for corruption," Delaney said. "The system still works".

Opotowsky hired me in December, 1975 as a correspondent at ABC News in New York. We worked together for six years. At first, I was his "northeast fireman," which meant I jumped on airplanes and went to whatever catastrophe or crisis was underway in the Northeastern United States. Soon, he sent me to the Middle East in similar circumstances. As former newspapermen, we seemed to bond, but I never knew what he had done as a reporter.

In 1981, ABC News shifted Opotowsky to directing political coverage and devising a system of tracking assignments by computer, a new tool. He retired in 1992, remembered, if at all, as a manager. He died in 1997 in Florida.

But in October, 2014, while writing this book, I decided to add a few lines about Opotowsky. My Internet query turned up a surprise artifact, a two-page typewritten story Opotowsky had filed via Western Union to The New York Post. The date-line: Sept. 28, 1962, Oxford, Mississippi.

His story was about Governor Ross Barnett's defiant opposition to admitting a black student, James Meredith, to the University of Mississippi.

In clear, simple prose, Opotowsky explained why the Justice Department had pushed in court to extend a deadline for admitting Meredith.

"There was the political consideration to be made just five weeks before a national election," he wrote. "The Kennedy Administration wants to go into those elections with a victory over Mississippi defiance, but a victory that quite clearly was earned only with a great show of compassion."

Three days later, Barnett backed down.

The discovery of Opotowsky's telegram, held in an Oxford office file for four decades, led me to begin a broader search for evidence of his work. The results astonished me.

In 1957, the Post had assigned Opotowsky, then 34, to look into the burgeoning civil rights struggle. He wrote a 12-part series investigating the White Citizens Council across the south.

His conclusion was stark and unconditional. The councils, he wrote, were "a brigade of bigots whose total domination of the populace can be matched only by the Communist Party within Russia."

In 1958, six months after covering the integration by nine black students of Little Rock's Central High School, he returned to the campus.

In a series of shocking articles, he reported a barrage of physical and emotional attacks on the eight remaining black teenagers (the ninth had been expelled for fighting back).

The perpetrators, he reported, were racist white students encouraged by parents and friends. With few exceptions, moderate white students had turned their backs. Neither the school

Opotowsky's Byline 'Was Just One You Learned To Look For'

nor Federal troops intervened, each disclaiming jurisdiction.

On April 7, 1958, Opotowsky wrote that eight black teenagers "walk each day into the hostile world of Central High School guarded only by their determination and their dignity."

"Technically, they are the most protected school children in the world. They have behind them the majesty of the U.S. Supreme Court, the force of the U.S. Army and the personal guidance of the Little Rock School Board.

"But in reality they walk alone," he wrote. "You see them move down the twisting halls of Central High in a quick, tense gait, eyes riveted to the fore, fearful and expectant."

Citing school records of 42 attacks, Opotowsky said:

"This is the sort of thing that happens almost daily at Central High -- kickings and pushings and name callings, incidents that are pitifully petty when taken alone, yet horrible torture when assembled in the unbroken chain which has lasted for six months now."

Fifty years later, Vanity Fair writer David Margolick unearthed Opotowsky's articles on microfilms in the New York Public Library. He used them for an article that led to Margolick's 2013 book, "Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock."

"It was just one of those bylines that you learned to look for," said Margolick in an interview. "His work stood out so much."

Opotowsky's coverage "was insightful, it was very sensitive," he said, "but it was gritty and gutsy because unlike most reporters he actually went inside the school. He saw the way that these kids were being treated."

"All nine of those kids knew my father, they invited him over, they trusted him," said Opotowsky's daughter Anne, a journalist, editor, and graphic novelist.

Her father was "exceptionally trustworthy," she said, one of a "subgroup" of southerners

especially skilled at civil rights reporting.

As journalists, they faced danger in "being able to get people to talk to you about this – white men who would admit to the crimes, prosecutors who had to put their lives on the line just to talk to you off the record," she said.

In 1958, Opotowsky turned his attention to life in Harlem and hit raw nerves, according to author Nissenson.

Co-written with a black resident, his articles featured "a former madam turned political donor," as well as the "numbers racket, the Apollo Theater, Negro politicians and ministers, and the lack of up-to-date facilities and textbooks in the neighborhood schools."

The series generated anger. "Many letter writers pointed out that the series ignored the Harlem Renaissance and the coming generation of Negro artists," Nissenson wrote.

Opotowsky's plain-spoken views caused one friend to question his judgments as superficial. Wilson (Bill) Minor, a Mississippi newspaperman, said he knew Opotowsky as a young journalist in New Orleans.

In 1959, Minor said, the two men covered a lynching in Pearl River County, Miss.

Recalling their conversations more than half a century later, Minor, in his 91st year, said: "He wasn't a stickler about the facts." Asked to explain, he said: "He would go on past the facts to reach a conclusion about what was true and what wasn't."

Discussing race, Wilson said, "Stan made some remark that all you had to do was pick out any black and just give them a bit more education and they would be as smart and as capable as any white person."

Minor suggested that Opotowsky's idealism caused him to ignore the realities of a Mississippi public education system ruled by whites: "I mean they still have the plantation mentality in this state, to suppress education" for blacks. [Author interview, March 15, 2015]

From the vantage point in the 21st Century,

A Writing Speed That Astounded Reporters Competing With Him on Big Stories

most would argue that both men were expressing an essential wisdom.

Opotowsky was no stranger to criticism -- even from beyond the grave. In 1956, he wrote a series of Post articles describing a drill instructor's role in the deaths of six Marine recruits at Parris Island, S.C.

In 1999, two years after his death, a writer accused Opotowsky of being "reckless," misstating the effect alcohol had in the instructor's decision to march a group of 78 trainees into a swamp at night.

"Every 'material fact' related by Opotowsky was either false or misleading," insisted author John Stevens. His book, written for the Naval Institute Press, downgraded the tragedy to an "incident" and assessed its negative impact on the Marine Corps' reputation.

Optowsky's stories were so vivid, Stevens

argued, that they unfairly magnified the Corps' failure in the eyes of the public. As far as is known, the Post stood behind its reporter, a World War II correspondent who had written about U.S. Marines in combat .

On November 22, 1963, Opotowsky, who had covered the 1960 Kennedy presidential campaign, was working on a story in Washington, D.C. When he picked up a pay telephone to call his office in New York, said Anne Opotowsky, he got a busy signal before he could insert a coin.

"His instincts told him that nothing could ever have done that, other than a crisis," she said. "He found out about five minutes later and got on a plane" to Dallas.

Days later, she said, her father confronted Melvin Belli, Jack Ruby's lawyer, as he attempted to portray patriotism as his client's



CAMPAIGN TRAIL: A trusted reporter, Opotowsky (circle) walked a few feet behind JFK and Jackie Kennedy in a 1960 New York City campaign parade.

Displaying “the skill of novelist” to build a suspenseful narrative

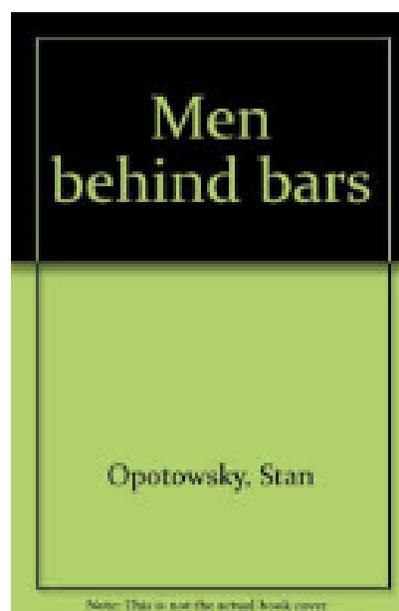
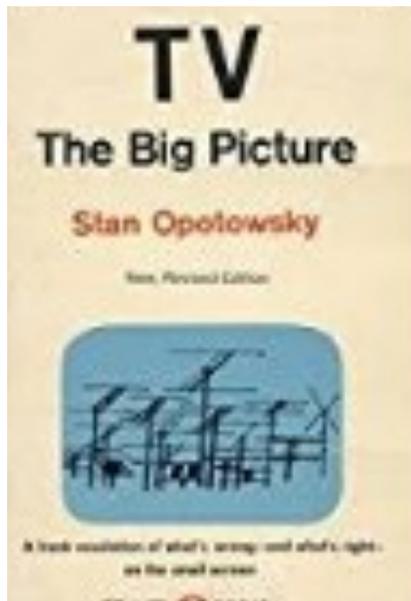
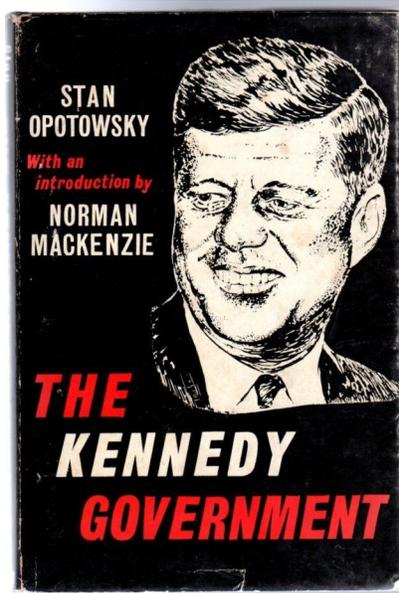
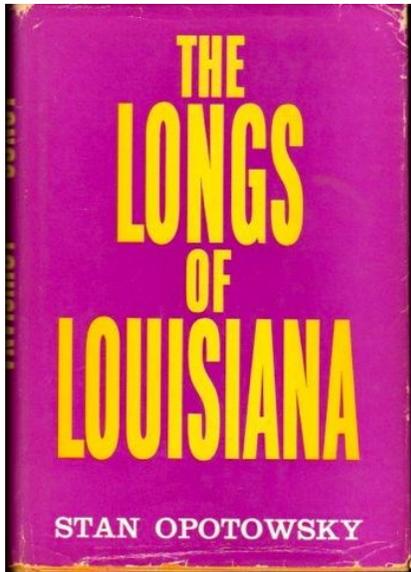
motive for killing Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald.

"My father wasn't buying it," she said. "It increased Belli's respect for my father and it developed a relationship. They would talk and he would tell him things off the record. My father got tons and tons of information from a guy that he didn't give an inch to."

The following year, Opotowsky co-wrote a Post series on corruption in New York city agencies. The stories exposed lucrative insider deals for restaurant franchises at the 1964 New York World's Fair. The no-bid contracts favored friends of Robert Moses, the city's parks commissioner and master planner.

Opotowsky's speed in writing astounded reporters who watched him work. John Gold, a British newspaperman who traveled often with Opotowsky to major American stories for nearly a decade beginning in 1956, called him "a tremendously complex character" and "a brilliant journalist."

His speed grew out of an extraordinary trait, Gold said. "He was able to compose his thoughts in such a way that he knew before he wrote exactly what he was going



to write." As a result, Gold said, Opotowsky "was very, very, very fast."

With another Internet search, I turned up the titles of four books Opotowsky wrote while working at the Post. Critics were often (but not always) impressed.

"Vivacious, sharply written, highly readable," wrote a New York Times reviewer on March 6, 1960, of "The Longs of Louisiana", which described the family that dominated his home state for decades. Still, despite his flair for storytelling, the critic decided, "the book is about as profound as a tabletop."

Nevertheless, a Times book columnist praised the author's description of the day in 1935 that Huey Long was assassinated. "Mr. Opotowsky uses the skill of a novelist to develop all the suspense a situation can stand."

"The Kennedy Government" (1961) described the political figures aligned with the newly elected president. It explained the process by which Kennedy chose among them to form his cabinet.

Richard Rovere, a leading political analyst, found "a sound, sensible, crisply written account of the President's work in assembling a

ABC's Bob Brown: 'A Reminder of Brilliance to Which We Were Exposed'

government.”

The problem, he concluded, was that despite Opatowsky's “competent, objective, and instructive” reporting, the book would be useful only for readers who did not follow the news and they, Rovere said, “don't read political books.”

“TV – The Big Picture” (1961), billed as a “close, hard look” at the world of the broadcast medium, was written during a New York newspaper strike and attracted little attention. His final book, “Men Behind Bars” (1972), appeared in the wake of the Attica Prison riots and portrayed dehumanizing experiences of the kind faced by convicts to this day.

Long after his death, one of Opatowsky's prime reporting competitors remembered his work. “I read many of his pieces--his was a prominent byline, and I always read The Post,” said Gay Talese in an email in February, 2015. “He was a respected figure in serious journalism during my time on the beat.”

“I am sad to say I did not know Stan Opo-

towsky personally, only by his reputation as a fine journalist,” said Talese, who covered the early civil rights struggle for The New York Times.

Details of Opatowsky's enterprise reporting surprised ABC News correspondents he hired more than three decades earlier.

“We were lucky to work for Stan,” said Lynn Sherr, the author and longtime 20/20 correspondent. “I only wish I'd known more of this.”

Bob Brown, another 20/20 correspondent, called Opatowsky's stories “a reminder of the brilliance to which we were exposed, in many instances without fully realizing it.” Brown lamented not knowing “the judgments he must have made, and the risks he no doubt took.”

Opatowsky passed away on September 30, 1997. In an obituary, The New York Times writer Dana Canedy said the former reporter, editor, and manager was “known for his fast, clear, and colorful writing.”

He was a reporter known then — and remembered now.