

ADVENTURER PROFILE

The Sky Is the Limit

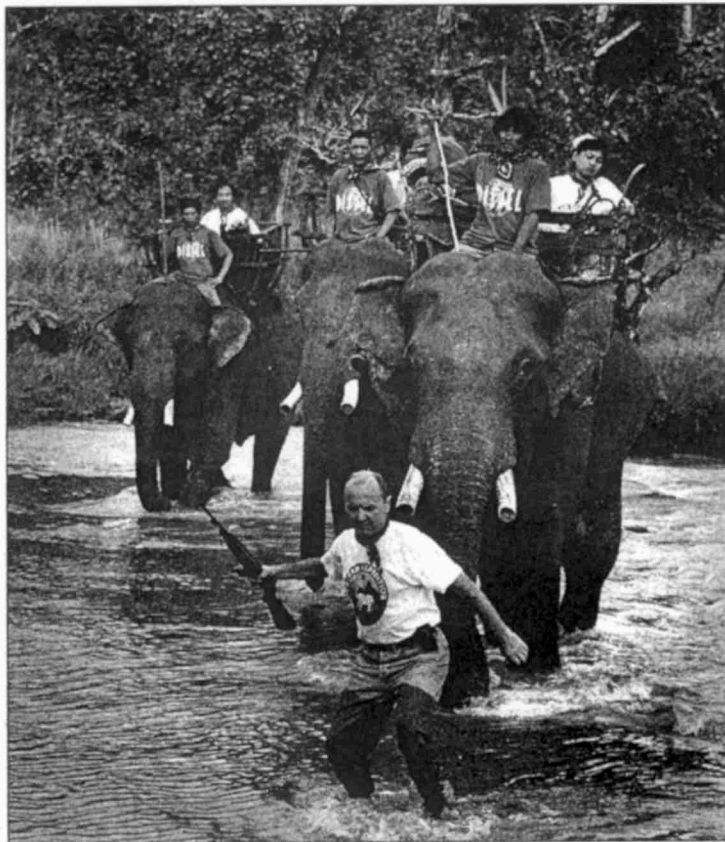
A man of the old school training a new generation in the ancient art of survival.

It is in the swamp lands of the Biebrza river basin in the northeast of Poland that Jacek Palkiewicz, born in 1942, the intrepid man of Polish adventuring, chooses to hold his survival school training courses. And not without reason, for this is one of the few real places left in this part of the world where one can fully pit oneself against the elements.

A renowned Polish journalist living in Italy, Palkiewicz has made traveling his way of life. He has been to the most distant corners of the world, crossed the Sahara and Gobi deserts on a camel, rowed down the Amazon river in a pirogue and sailed on the Yangtze in a Chinese sampan. "Now I feel that the world has shrunk. There are fewer and fewer places which tempt me," he said during his brief visit to Warsaw to see the release of his recent book, *Survival. Sztuka przetrwania* (Survival. The Art of Surviving). He was then on his way back to the Sahara to train an international elite of anti-terrorist troops. The international program organized last fall with which he is attached in the Sahara included Poles, Russians and Italians. "I'm satisfied, because the conditions were extreme—exactly what we needed," he says. "We were there during the hottest period in 20 years: over 50 Celsius. In addition, the sirocco wind was blowing. We felt as if we were in a gigantic oven." The trip's aim was to become acquainted with the area and practice the skills necessary for surviving in the desert. The participants were also carrying out tactical military tasks. Not all of them, however, endured the hardships of training: One Italian had to be transported to hospital due to dehydration.

On a more tourist-oriented note, Palkiewicz has some interesting insights and points of advice. "Interest in adventure travel is determined by culture, ways of thinking and tradition," he says. "The most intensive and dangerous trips most often tend to be undertaken by French or British explorers. It is part of their colonial traditions, although this is by no means the determining factor." Age is another consideration. But, as long as you are reasonably fit, he says, it is no real obstacle to adventure traveling.

However, jumping on the first plane to Bhutan on a whim after reading an exciting story, without preparation, is not recommended. If you want to take a vacation in extreme conditions, you should adjust yourself to them gradually. "You must not think about breaking world records right away," warns Palkiewicz. In the past, scouting was a good way to train before setting off on adventures. At present, there are more opportunities: courses, special schools, documentaries and press articles.



Wading through deepish waters: Palkiewicz at work

Palkiewicz is appreciative of the constantly improving equipment now available, which is making traveling increasingly less uncomfortable. But he has his doubts too. "Today people aren't strong," he says, "civilization has turned them into weaklings. Our fathers and grandfathers who would walk in the mountains with home-sewn backpacks had fewer comforts than today's tourists; yet didn't feel uncomfortable."

Perhaps this is confirmed by the example of Palkiewicz's children, who haven't followed in his footsteps. "They're made of a completely different material," he says. "When I try to talk them into jogging, they say it's too hot. They're the representatives of today's generation which wants to be comfortable and avoids effort. Maybe they're just opposing their father for the sake of it? Maybe my popularity has overwhelmed them?" he says.

The next course he will undertake after the Sahara is winter anti-terrorist training in Siberia, involving people from five European countries. Their selection depends on the troop commanders: Some prefer to have one person who has been trained in a variety of conditions; others send several specialists, each for training in a different climate. Acclimatization is crucial. For example, a European arriving in a tropical country immediately loses about 30 percent of their physical capacity. And in this job, you have to be ready to act right off the plane.

Palkiewicz is the director of the International Center for Anti-Terrorist Strategy, where the idea for international training was conceived. If, for example, Polish citizens were kidnapped and taken to a desert or a tropical forest, Polish rescue-commandos might have problems surviving in the harsh local conditions. These short training courses are intended to prepare them to operate instantly on leaving the plane, without wasting time on acclimatization. The recent program in the Sahara lasted 10 days. The training consists of a series of sessions in different climatic conditions. "In May, we were in Amazonia, in the

Palkiewicz on Palkiewicz

I'm a man of Prussian discipline, so many people can't stand me. Not everyone likes such strict rules during expeditions. This is not the result of my upbringing, but rather of my own experiences. At home, there was no tradition of traveling. I was born in a German hard-labor camp in Immensen. Maybe that's where my will to survive at any price comes from.

fall, in the Sahara, and in the winter, we'll be working in Siberia," says Palkiewicz. "These are non-governmental projects, but they're supported unofficially by governments."

Asked where his interest in travel comes from, Palkiewicz replies, "This drive has been in me since I was a child. First I sailed in the Mazuria [lake region], then on the Baltic, and later, when the Baltic became too small for me, I set off to other parts of the world." Traveling became a profession for Palkiewicz in 1972. He always looks for new experiences, for things that have remained as they were in the past: ancient tribes, places previously unvisited by humans—nature's last wildlife enclaves.

In a bilingual Polish-English album on Cambodia he wrote that this country evokes romantic feelings in him. "The huge Angkor Vat temple complex is like an open-air museum which has fascinated me with its beauty," he says. As a rule, he doesn't go to museums, leaving this form of entertainment to his wife, who is a painter.

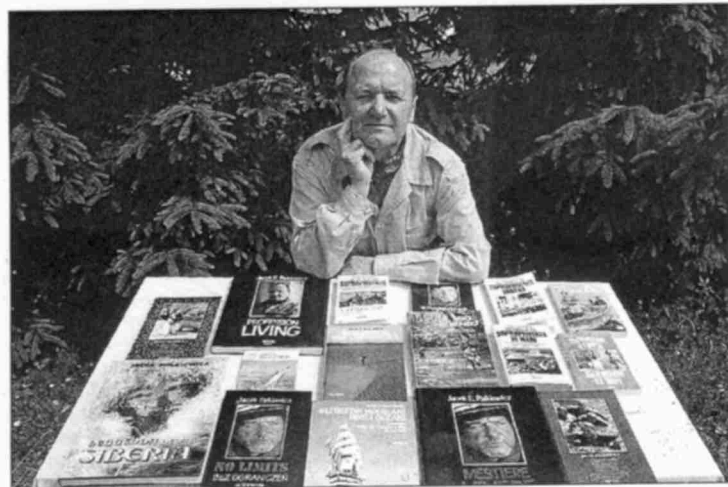
Palkiewicz has long stopped counting the miles he has flown in helicopters or made by train. Together with an international team of hydrologists and hydrographers, Palkiewicz has worked on determining the sources of the Amazon River. That expedition took a year and a half to prepare and included scientists from Lima university, the Hydrography Department of the Peruvian Navy, the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Geographical Society of Peru.

His recent book, *Survival*, may be of use not only to tourists but also to geologists, geographers and naturalists on expeditions to distant corners of the world. Palkiewicz is the author of 12 books published in Italy and six books in Poland. The most recent one is about surviving in the city jungle. For the last six years he has written reports from his expeditions for a supplement to *Corriere della Sera*.

Palkiewicz has been living abroad for 30 years now. When martial law was introduced in Poland in 1981, he organized an aid center in Italy and sent 17 trucks with aid for the Solidarity movement and the Catholic Church in Poland. Subsequently, the Polish border was closed to him for two years. He now visits Poland often.

"I consider myself an extremely fortunate person, because I have managed to go on the expeditions I have dreamed of," he says. His dream now is to travel into outer space and he has even received a cut-price (50 percent off) offer from a senior Russian general Wladimir Szatalow to do so. Such a "cheap" ticket would still set him back at least \$6 million and, he says, "it is probably one dream that will not come true."

Wanda Jelonekiewicz



Promoting a wild-life: Palkiewicz and his books