Telling it as she sees it

Pulitzer prize winning journalist Judith Miller expounds on her profession and the changes taking place today, which, she says, have made it ‘more difficult’

Judith Miller is a big name in the media world, having spent close to 30 years as a front-line writer for The New York Times. Much of that time involved long stays in our neck of the woods, including Egypt – a country dear to her heart – as well as Morocco and Tunisia.

She is no stranger to Israel, either, and recently enjoyed a few days here as a guest of the incipient Jerusalem Press Club, which officially kicks off on June 16. Drawing on her vast experience in the field, she delivered well-attended lectures at Bar-Ilan University and at Jerusalem’s Mishkenot Sha’ananim.

The 65-year-old Pulitzer Prize winner looks fresh and happy to be in Jerusalem when we meet for breakfast at Mishkenot Sha’ananim, despite her having endured several logistical difficulties. Her suitecase went missing from her Turkish Airlines flight, and there were problems with her air conditioning. But for someone who put her heart, soul and lots of footwork into uncovering the backdrop to the 9/11 attack – she was part of the New York Times team that won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting in that area – such hiccups are eminently navigable.

She has had to handle far more serious and painful situations. One in particular ended badly for her when, in 2005, she spent 85 days in jail after a federal US judge decreed she had violated the law by refusing to divulge the name of a confidential source.

“It was tough in jail,” she admits. “What I really missed was air and light. [The environment] was encased the whole time, except for three hours – I added it up. It was tough, because I am a kind of outdoor person.”

Despite being what one might call a “white-collar inmate,” she says she got no special privileges at the Alexandria Detention Center in Virginia.

“[Zacarias] Moussaoui, the 20th 9/11 hijacker, was on the third floor, and I was on the second floor. He had a suite of rooms because he was defending himself, so he had a desk and Internet. I had a very small cell.”

That episode in her life ties in neatly with the main line of her talks here, in which she has focused on the freedom of the press. That is still a major theme of her journalistic activity. In 2010, she was critical of the Israeli government’s decision to place a gag order on the country’s media coverage regarding the case of Anat Kamm, who was accused of copying secret IDF documents and leaking them to Haaretz reporter Uri Blau.

“That was a ridiculous situation in which there was censorship of the story in Israel, but the media abroad was running stories on it,” notes Miller, who now works for Fox News. “And Israel is the only democracy in the region.”

She says she is not sorry for not bowing to the court’s demands in 2005 and serving time. If she did have the power to change anything in her career to date, though, she says, it would be the time slot of her journalistic activity.

“I regret very few things, but one thing I do regret is that I wasn’t starting out right now, looking at the Arab Spring. That is something all of us [reporters] missed, and I am always interested in the things that are missed.”

That, possibly, ranks even more in view of her strong bond with the Middle East, and the time she spent here as a highly active reporter.

“When I went to Egypt as a young correspondent for the Times, I was the first woman appointed to head an Arab country’s bureau. It is also interesting that the Times had only two exceptions to its language rule. All Times foreign correspondents have to speak the language [of the country in which they are stationed], whether it’s Chinese or Polish or whatever. The two exceptions were the Cairo bureau and the Israel bureau. You didn’t have to speak Hebrew, and you didn’t have to speak Arabic.”

That linguistic deficiency notwithstanding, she managed her work and got to interview many of the region’s leaders. One she holds in particular regard is assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat.

“He was wonderful and amazing, a crazy genius,” she recalls. “I interviewed him just before he died [in 1981], although that was in the States. That was a time of great turmoil and change, but I came away from around 20 years of working in the region thinking that this is the most change-averse culture – I am speaking of the Arab culture.”

She wrote about that aversion to change, she explains, in her 1996 book, God Has Ninety-Nine Names. “You felt that, in particular, in Egypt. There is an extraordinary desire there for a kind of Pharaonic, father-like figure. There is, you know, the orderliness of the Nile, and the waters had to flow on time, and everything had to work. And this is after 7,000 years of Pharaohs and dictators. It is not for nothing that there is this saying in Arabic: ‘Better 40 years of tyranny than four hours of anarchy.’ There is a real fear of anarchy there.”
Even with all those years of experience in the Middle East, though, she and plenty of her colleagues got it wrong when the first signs of unrest began.

"I was in Morocco when the Arab Spring was starting in Tunisia," she says. "I remember I was talking to some Moroccan journalists, and they said, 'This will spread to Egypt,' and I said, I knew that could never happen, not in Egypt. To me, Egypt is largely the Arab world. It is the intellectual trendsetter. But I got it wrong, and everyone else did, too. Even [three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist] Tom Friedman, who admits to getting very few things wrong, said this is the time to sit back and take notes. I'm still taking notes, trying to understand this extraordinary phenomenon."

Miller has had plenty of time to reflect on why she and her counterparts misread the political and social rumblings in the Middle East.

"One reason I thought I missed it is that I was so busy talking to people our age that I wasn't talking to the children, I wasn't talking to people's kids on the Internet -- the ones who were out on the streets and started this," she muses.

"One thing we do know about revolutions is that they start with the middle class," she continues. "If we have one misconception about what happened in the Arab Spring, it is that we think it was a revolt of the downtrodden. No, it wasn't. It was your typical, classical middle-class revolution with a group of educated young people, with great expectations and hopes, who looked around them and said the whole world around them is changing and we are not, and that is unacceptable. And these were [ousted Egyptian president Hosni] Mubarak's 'children,' and they destroyed him."

After so long on the regional beat, Miller says all she can do now is look on from afar.

"My life is in the United States now, so I can't be out here full-time trying to understand what is happening here. I think I understand what is happening in Egypt, and I am very worried about what I see everywhere. I know Israelis tend to say it's a brief respite, for a change it's not about us, and Israel hasn't been blamed for the Arab Spring -- yet," she says with a laugh.

But she adds that she is still keeping tabs on events in the Middle East. "I go to the Middle East at least twice a year, and I have been in most of the Arab countries since the Arab Spring began. It is not an Arab Spring, it is an Islamic Winter."

One of her four books to date (a new one about her long stint at The New York Times is in the works) is called Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War, which topped the best-seller list. Unfortunately serendipity gave the book sales a boost, as it came out around the time of 9/11 and the ensuing anthrax-letter terrorist attacks. The latter also had a temporary but dramatic effect on Miller's work environment. "The New York Times was shut down for a while during the anthrax letter scare," she recalls. "That was an amazing moment, to see a newsroom totally quiet, with me sitting at my desk, the telephones ringing off their hooks unanswered, and people in white suits and respirators looking around the Times for powder. That was really scary."

She may have maintained her professional poise throughout that troublesome period, but she says it was also something of a defense mechanism. "That's the way you deal with emotional loss -- all the journalists knew someone who had died in 9/11 -- you pour yourself into your work," she says.

It was when the tension abated that the pressure cooker finally blew.

"Around six weeks later, when we all came up for air, we [the Times journalists] had a huge fight over nothing. We started shouting at each other, and the editor, Steve Engelberg -- my co-author on Germs -- said, 'Hey, everybody, calm down. This is not us. This is about what we have been through.' We finally had some release."

Miller was out in the field during the Iraq War, when she was the only reporter to be embedded for four months with the 75th Expeditionary Task Force -- the multi-service unit entrusted with the highly sensitive mission of hunting for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq. As such, she took some flak when, after writing a series of articles about Saddam Hussein's ambition and capacity to produce WMDs, the reports of the latter proved to be inaccurate following the war.

"What I find amazing is all this kerfuffle about [how] we got the Iraq War intelligence so wrong, and [how] we failed as an industry because we didn't challenge that intelligence. I just think that [attitude] is so ignorant of how national security reporting works," she declares. "It is really very tough to do this reporting. I think we had a kind of false narrative about the Iraq War, how we got into it -- not the disasters, that's undeniable -- but what we thought we knew, on top of 9/11, that's a very powerful emotional combination, and if you're an American, it makes you want to lash out, and it says to you, do not want to take risks. If you can preempt something, you're going to do it now -- err on the side of safety."

The world of the media has changed irrevocably during the three-plus decades of her career in journalism. Today, anyone can take an action photo with a cellphone, write a blog, or post a report on Facebook, or any other social media, and make the information available to anyone across the globe with unmonitored Internet access.

"That makes the job of the professional reporter so much harder. People have to understand that [journalism] is a craft, and there are rules."

There are other factors, such as security policies, that also get in the way. "There are many more meetings [of the government authorities], but more of them are classified than ever before," she says. "Since 9/11, there are 60 new categories of classified information in the United States which did not exist before. Meetings that used to be open are now closed -- important meetings, like nuclear safety meetings if you have a nuclear plant in your neighborhood. This president [Barack Obama] has turned down more Freedom of Information requests on national security grounds -- every year the number climbs up. That's because we [journalists] are not doing our job, because we're not telling [the public]. It's become much more difficult."