

Plagues and Miracles

Chapter 2: Role of Bananas in Jumping Evaluation

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Without bananas, Joseph Conrad and the author would not have succeeded; however, bananas can be, or should be, eaten just with our fingers; otherwise, Charles Darwin would become irrelevant, we would lose a banana, and the jumping evolution would cease.

Throughout my life, plagues and miracles, successes and failures, and other combinations of positive and negative events have frequently come without warning to either destroy me or save me, then elevate me to a higher social status, only to bring me down at their nearest opportunity. But as this book will show, I have managed to survive so many years of my life reasonably well, and most importantly, I am still alive. We are already familiar with my mother's two golden rules of survival: to always be ready to fight any system that might not be your friend by excellent performance at school, and to learn everything available to us to develop intellectual abilities to fight back, survive, and succeed. She also told me many times that “if they throw you out of the window, find the nearest door and get back to win the fight”. We already know her two golden rules. What I hadn't yet told you was her third: “If they throw you out of the window, find the nearest door and get back to win the fight.”

My mother never asked me to initiate conflicts, never! What she was trying to do was to prepare me for my jumping life out of my tiny town in the middle of the cold, ruthless, poor Polish communism, knowing quite well that it would not be easy. She lost her fight and sacrificed her jumping for the love of her family. In return, my physician father could have locked himself in a hospital, his private clinic, and the state clinic for about fourteen or more hours a day, six times a week, taking care of many thousands of residents in a large county served by just three physicians.

In Chapter 24 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli observed that “**It is a common fault of men not to reckon on storms in fair weather**”. He argued that when things are going smoothly, individuals and leaders fall into complacency and ignore future dangers. My mother was already familiar with

this aspect of humanity without reading *The Prince* and prepared me well to handle my storms, and there have been more of them around than I could even count.

I have given considerable thought to how to write this book — how to pull a reader past the first page and keep them there. Our civilization has produced countless volumes, some exceptionally crafted, on every conceivable subject, except, of course, the banana tests. One could argue that crafting another book lacks purpose, as so much has already been articulated. This contention might hold if the progression of our civilization were less bewildering, less destructive, and marked by fewer instances of violence. Sadly, when we survey the world around us, we observe countless individuals, groups, and nations grappling with untangling the meaning of a fulfilling, constructive, harmonious life — their fabric of life unraveling due to circumstances largely beyond their control.

In a world where so many search for the elusive “perfect” system promising happiness — where bewildered populations strive for the ideal way of life, yet grow ever more disappointed and angrier with one another — my book might, in some small way, help readers realize that the answers they seek are often within arm’s reach. Drawing on my varied life experiences, encompassing an array of political, cultural, and religious systems that have shaped my journey, I aspire to offer a perspective on life yet to be articulated. It echoes an old Polish children’s tale, “*Matolek the Billy-Goat*” — more on him later — whose hero circles the globe chasing happiness only to find it waiting at home.

Given that I’m endeavoring to write the “greatest story” about jumping across several political systems, it’s worth exploring if any other jumper preceded me — someone who truly made an impact and left an indelible mark on generations of readers worldwide through their “tales of jumping”. In high school, the supposed perfection of the communist system in Eastern Europe compelled me to learn about Joseph Conrad.

Joseph Conrad — born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Poland in 1857 — became one of English literature’s most celebrated novelists despite not becoming fluent in English until his twenties or even later, writing “*Typhoon*” and “*Lord Jim*” among the works that made his name. Almost no one recognizes his birth name; everyone recognizes Lord Jim’s author.

The comparison between Conrad and me arises solely from our shared experience of enduring profound suffering while navigating numerous systems and cultures, all in an effort to survive alongside my family. However, I possess a significant advantage over Conrad: I departed Poland as an educated engineer and scientist. I also held a Ph.D. from an esteemed Polish university with deeply entrenched German academic traditions before the war. I did not have to write stories in my fractured English to earn a living — what the English might call “making a quid”.

Upon crossing the English border, the British acknowledged my Polish training in engineering and science. While they didn’t exactly embrace me with open arms, their historical tradition of skepticism towards foreigners, influenced by a history replete with invasions, was evident. Nevertheless, they appreciated my engineering and scientific ability as I served as a foreign subject to their revered Queen. Conrad, in contrast, didn’t enjoy such luxuries. He was forced to compose entertaining, captivating stories for his English readers — a task I can understand.

Having spent six years in Cambridge, at the heart of their cultural and scientific center, surrounded by Nobel Prize winners and celebrities like Stephen Hawking (whom I encountered a few times), I am well acquainted with the British disposition. I had even heard of instances where my wife had the opportunity to clean Hawking’s ears at Addenbrooke’s Hospital. Thankfully, I never encountered Newton, who lived next door to me three hundred years ago. Hawking remarked in one of his books that “Newton was not a nice man”.

Like Conrad, I left Poland with a few languages but barely rudimentary English. As someone once ironically noted, my English accent is “still in Warsaw” — much like Conrad’s was, since we both began learning English in our mid-twenties.

I’m still alive, an aspect that separates me from Conrad, who had already passed away. My brush with mortality occurred at age sixty-two, involving a surgical procedure that virtually split me in two, entailing extensive cardiovascular reconstruction over several hours. Subsequent years were dedicated to recovery, predominantly on the psychological front, although physical rehabilitation played a part, too.

Therefore, following my partially educated “communist” mother (and the Prince), any success, as anyone who has lived honestly knows, requires preparing for failure first. One must cultivate

persistence, resilience in the face of mental and physical battering, self-healing of fractured bones — be they physical or mental — and an ability to weather shattered nerves. These qualities need to be nurtured before embarking on substantial jumps, unlike the minor ones we frequently encounter. In the pages ahead, I will share with you how my mother's mental coaching (or tormenting?) helped me handle the greatest challenge of my life – the Banana Test at Cambridge.

It's worth noting that our evolutionary success hinges on the fact that humans, just like our primate predecessors, wouldn't have achieved much if we hadn't progressed from one metaphorical tree to another. And no, the reason wasn't that the grass was greener on the other trees. Instead, the bananas' alluring taste and nutritional value drew us. Those bananas were abundant on different trees, and by making these jumps, we could evade predators lurking on the ground beneath our tree. Allow me to emphasize that these predators persist — they are aplenty and have evolved to be even more cunning, lethal, and intelligent than those of millennia past.

Bananas played a significant role in my personal development, so let me share my experiences with bananas from my past. I had my first banana in high school; they were not readily available in communist grocery stores in the 1950s and 1960s. During a family vacation to the Baltic Sea, my father, a highly accomplished provincial physician, found a banana while swimming. Most likely, one of the merchant ships carrying bananas from Africa to the elite of the Soviet Union lost a banana. Sitting on a blanket by the shore, my family debated how to share the banana, adhering to communist principles of social justice while acknowledging my father's incredible gift.

After some family negotiations, my sister and I received most of the banana; a small portion went to my mother, and the great banana fisherman got the skin with a tidbit of meat. This was my first encounter with bananas. No wonder those funny-looking primate humans were attracted to the bananas on the other trees. I would swim across the Baltic Sea to get my second banana since I enjoyed a piece of the first one so much. The “ugly Swedish bloodsucking capitalist” had bananas, and I had my first one, which we shared among the four of us, not so much justly, but what I would have done for my own family anyway.

My second experience with bananas as part of my banana-driven evolution happened at a dinner at Darwin College in Cambridge in the eighties. As we all remember from biology classes, Charles Darwin discovered the law that bananas are always better on other trees, and we should get them

fast to avoid starvation. This perfectly agrees with his actual “survival of the fittest” law. Sitting at the high table was a big deal at Cambridge, and I was sitting at the high table in the college named after Darwin. I was finishing my dinner, which, as usual, was great. I looked around and noticed something unusual.

The entire table was watching me, all those masters, dons, and other funny-looking guys wearing their Cambridge gowns, all except me. They were watching to see if I knew how to eat with a fork and knife in both hands, the European way. So very clearly tuned out, I passed the first test since my dictatorial mother would rather starve me to death than let me eat with my fingers or the way most of us eat in the States. There is a slight difference between how we hold the fork in our left hand in Europe and how the British do it. I can do it now both ways; I have “developed” so much after Cambridge.

Anyway, after successfully passing the first and second-course tests, I was suddenly served a banana on a small plate with a funny-looking fork and a knife on either side. As a non-civilized, semi-intelligent communist from Eastern Europe, aiming to be faster than the predators around me at the table, I grabbed the banana, peeled it as most of us would, and enjoyed the meaty interior. You should have seen the faces around me. Finally, they got me; OK, perhaps I slightly exaggerated.

I was supposed to pick up the funny-looking fork and the small, semi-blunt knife, peel the banana off the skin, cut the meat with the knife, and eat the banana with the fork, and never, I repeat, never touch the banana with my fingers. Some of us at the table were most likely amused as I failed my first banana test. At the same time, they forgave me, as I assumed, since I was just a semi-primitive communist, and what can you expect from a communist? It did not matter that I spoke several languages then and could play Chopin on the piano, but I could not speak their stiff-upper-lip Royal English fluently. My subsequent chapters will say more about my Cambridge experience and my enormous gratitude to the British people for their help and their hospitality.

Bananas, as the next chapters will show, also played a massive role in my cultural development and my English-language education. A banana was used in my first spoken sentence, barely pronounced in English, when I was almost twenty. Therefore, bananas should be respected,

admired, and, most importantly, eaten without hesitation — peeled with your fingers, and enjoyed immediately, before a predator gets there first.