Plagues and Miracles

Chapter 2: Role of Bananas in Jumping Evolution

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Bananas should be eaten with our fingers; otherwise, Charles Darwin would become irrelevant, we would lose a banana, and the jumping evolution would cease.

In the 1950s and 1960s, bananas were not readily available in communist grocery stores. My first one came out of the Baltic Sea. During a family vacation, 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 Soviet elite lost one. Sitting on a blanket by the shore, my family debated how to share it, balancing communist principles of social justice with my father's incredible gift.

After some family negotiations, my sister and I got most of the banana; my mother got a small portion, 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 enjoyed my piece so much that I would have swum across the Baltic Sea for a second one, since the "ugly Swedish bloodsucking capitalist" on the other side certainly had bananas.

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.

Let me emphasize that these predators persist—they are aplenty and have evolved to be even more cunning, lethal, and intelligent than those of millennia past.

My second experience with bananas 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, when I noticed something unusual. The entire table was watching me, all those masters, dons, and other guys and gentlemen 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. Evidently, I passed that 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 both ways now; I have “developed” so much after Cambridge.

Then, after I passed the first and second courses, they suddenly served me 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, trying to beat the predators around me at the table, I grabbed the banana, peeled it like most of us, and enjoyed the meaty interior. You should have seen the faces around me. Finally, they got me, I said to myself. OK, maybe I exaggerated a bit to make my story better.

I was supposed to pick up the funny-looking fork and the small, semi-blunt knife, peel the banana, cut the meat with the knife, eat it with the fork, and never, I repeat, never touch it 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 didn't matter that I spoke several languages then and could play Chopin on the piano; I couldn't 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.

My mother had prepared me for many storms, but not for a major banana challenge. We already knew her two golden rules of survival: always be ready to fight any system that might not be your friend through excellent performance at school, and learn everything available to develop the intellectual abilities to fight back, survive, and succeed. What I hadn't yet told you was her third: an educated person should play at least one instrument. Therefore, I play the piano, level 8, self-

taught, which, if I recall, I mentioned at the High Table. She also told me many times, “If they throw you out of the window, find the nearest door and get back to win the fight.” Her mental coaching (or tormenting?) prepared me for the greatest challenge of my life—the Banana Test at Cambridge.

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, so that my physician father could lock 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.

Was there another jumper before me — someone who truly made an impact and left an indelible mark on generations of readers worldwide through “tales of jumping”? In high school, I learned about one: Joseph Conrad. I read two of his works, “Typhoon” and “Lord Jim,” and was utterly captivated.

Was there another jumper before me — someone who truly made an impact and left an indelible mark on generations of readers worldwide through “tales of jumping”? In high school, I learned about one: Joseph Conrad. I read two of his works, “Typhoon” and “Lord Jim,” and was utterly captivated**.** I was haunted by Jim's story: a young sea officer who makes the split-second, dishonorable decision to jump from his crowded, sinking ship, the *Patna***.** Although the plot details have faded, what remains etched in my memory is the enchantment those books instilled in me. It showed in my school essays, which I wrote as 20- or 30-minute quizzes to show my teachers I understood the novels.

Joseph Conrad (born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, December 3, 1857 – August 3, 1924) was a Polish-British novelist and short story writer, counted among the leading writers in the English language, whose sensibility was never quite English. Almost no one recognizes his birth name. On multiple occasions, I’ve asked about Józef Korzeniowski in different countries, and the response has been consistently: “I’m not familiar with someone by that name.” But when I mention Joseph Conrad, nearly everyone responds: “Oh, yes, the ‘Lord Jim’ and the ‘Typhoon’ guy.”

What is remarkable is that Conrad left Poland at sixteen with Polish, French, and Russian, and learned English essentially from scratch in his twenties, after his maritime years in France. Most people write and converse in their native languages with relative ease and without significant deliberation. For someone educated in English, speaking and writing proficiently is second nature, free of psychological struggle. For a foreigner striving to secure acceptance and understanding, communication becomes an intricate mental exercise fraught with psychological and personal turmoil. Conrad endured tremendous emotional hardship while writing his exceptional narratives, a plight I can genuinely comprehend. His banana test was the English language itself, and he sat it on every page. While he was writing the stories that made him famous, his health was precarious, and writing in a foreign language most likely contributed to it. He died at sixty-six and was buried in England; his wife was English.

For Conrad, writing was not merely a creative outlet but a crucial source of income. He had to write entertaining, captivating stories for his English readers to earn the money needed to support his Polish-English family—a task I can understand. After my seven years in England, six of them in Cambridge, I can deeply empathize with his ordeal, and I know the cruel, arrogant, and indifferent demeanor the British can exhibit toward foreigners, especially those striving to thrive in their country. However, I've also learned that if they embrace you, they will hold you dear forever and become your steadfast allies.

The comparison between Conrad and me purely stems from our shared experience of enduring profound suffering while navigating multiple systems and cultures, all in a bid to survive alongside our families. However, I had a significant advantage over Conrad: I departed Poland a well-educated engineer and scientist with a Ph.D. from a highly esteemed Polish university with deeply entrenched German academic traditions from before the war. I didn't have to write stories in my fractured English to earn a living—what the English might call "making a quid". After I crossed the English border, the British acknowledged my Polish training in engineering and science. They didn't exactly embrace me with open arms; their historical skepticism toward foreigners, shaped by invasions, was evident. Nevertheless, they appreciated my engineering and scientific ability as I served as a foreign semi-subject to their revered Queen. Conrad, in contrast, didn't enjoy such luxuries.

Like Conrad, I left Poland with Russian and German and less than rudimentary English. As someone once ironically noted, my English accent is "still in Warsaw"—much like Conrad's, since I, too, began learning English as a young man (more in the subsequent chapters). One of my academic acquaintances called Conrad a genius. Let me disillusion everyone: I am not a literary prodigy, nor do I intend to affect such pretense in my book.

Still, intriguing parallels surface between us. Conrad left Poland because of the political atmosphere in Eastern Europe, dominated by a Russian Czar in the nineteenth century. About a hundred years later, my departure was prompted by my exasperation with Eastern-style Polish communist politics, which also emanated from the East. The difference is that Conrad was a subject of the Russian Czars as a youth, while I dealt with my Polish communist leaders. These "Polish Czars" frequently journeyed to Moscow to report to the Soviet Czars ensconced within the Kremlin. Interestingly, the last non-Soviet Czar met a tragic fate in 1918, along with his entire close family; he had also reigned as king of Poland, as had several of his predecessors.

My own journey of upheaval began in post-World War II Poland, a nation deeply scarred by German fascists and then subjected to Russian-style communism following our so-called liberation. Like Conrad, I departed my homeland because of the devastation brought by the Eastern invaders, and my achievements so far are primarily attributable to those eventful transitions — the same devastating "political winds" blowing from the East that we can now observe again in Ukraine.

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.

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. Nurture these qualities before taking substantial jumps, unlike the minor ones we frequently encounter.

Conrad and I have taken many jumps, faced defeats and successes, and then faced new disasters and recoveries in the relentless pursuit of excellence.

Bananas, as the next chapters will show, also played a major role in my cultural development and my English-language education. I used a banana in my first spoken sentence, barely pronounced in English, when I was almost twenty. So bananas should be respected, admired, and, most importantly, eaten without hesitation—peeled with your fingers and enjoyed immediately, before a predator gets there first.