

Plagues and Miracles

Preface

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In the midst of Poland's political collapse in 1988/89, with my family stranded in Britain and no future in sight, a letter arrived from an American university in Oregon — and everything changed. My physician wife could not practice medicine in the UK, my modest academic salary at Cambridge could no longer support us, and our two young children depended on me to navigate a path through uncertainty. That single piece of paper was both a lifeline and a summons into the unknown — a miracle arriving in the shadow of what felt like a never-ending plague.

That letter was the surface of something my mother had been building in me for thirty years. Growing up as the son of a physician in a small town in communist Poland, I belonged to the intelligentsia, which placed me near the bottom of the political hierarchy, not the top. "You are not allowed to get grades below an A," she told me repeatedly, "because the system is waiting for you to fail." My school friends, mostly from farming or factory families, were permitted more ordinary lives. I was not.

To make my young life even more painful, my mother used to tell me, "Maciej, you have to learn everything". In my response and defense, I said, "Mama, I cannot learn everything; nobody can. Why do you want me to learn everything?" Her usual response was, "You never know what you will need in life to survive and succeed." That less than modestly educated woman in the middle of very poor communism deep in Poland already knew what the best panacea for survival and successful life was, especially right now, in the age of artificial intelligence (AI).

That pressure was relentless and, at times, crushing — but it created something in me that no system could confiscate: an unconditional drive to learn everything, regardless of the hostility of the environment. Even now, at seventy-three, I am still obeying her, chasing knowledge across multiple fields to stay competitive against AI itself. Have I succeeded in answering my mother's demand? This memoir is that answer.

That drive carried me through thirty years in Poland, through martial law and the slow suffocation of communist ideology, and finally to what once seemed impossible — Cambridge University, where I worked alongside Nobel Prize winners and built friendships with some of the greatest British and American scientists of my generation. It then carried me further west, to the United States, where I founded a National Science Foundation Center of Excellence and contributed to technologies now used in global energy and aerospace systems.

Throughout this journey, I held fast to a principle rooted in the genuine communist ideals I had embraced early in life — fairness, equality, shared responsibility — and deepened by the sincere Christian convictions nurtured in my Catholic family home. From around age four, I felt the tension between Christianity and communism, a struggle I now see reflected in the ideological battles of modern America. I came to believe that my scientific and professional accomplishments should never outpace my social engagement. That belief was tested repeatedly, and it held.

So did my family. The wife who could not practice medicine in England became a prominent physician in Denver — the same woman I told the news to on the day that letter arrived.

Our children carried it further still: a daughter who became a senior executive at REI's headquarters in Seattle, a son doing groundbreaking research on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's at the University of Lund. Three grandchildren — the greatest delight of my life — carry the story forward.

By reading this memoir, you will gain a nuanced understanding of the consequences of political extremes and a realistic perspective on the strengths and flaws of different systems. These pages offer pivotal life lessons forged while navigating the world's major political systems — lessons that proved essential not only in times of triumph but also in the moments when plagues arrived, and only a miracle could answer them.

Above all, this book is a record of resilience — of an unwavering determination to withstand both physical and mental tribulation, and to find, on the other side, something worth passing on.

In today's increasingly polarized world, perhaps my unique perspective — shaped by a lifetime lived under both communist and capitalist regimes — offers the kind of bridge we so urgently need. I invite you to walk beside me through ruins and triumphs, betrayals and breakthroughs, and to rediscover, through my story, the quiet miracle of human resilience.

