

Palm Trees – a Very Personal Column.

Palm trees in South Africa are nothing special but a palm tree growing in an apartment in Warsaw during the years before the second world war was no ordinary plant. It filled the largest room in my parents' rather small but sunny apartment and for me it was perfectly natural because I had become used to seeing it from my earliest childhood. I knew only that before I was born it was much smaller but then it grew rapidly, astonishing visitors with its size and beauty.

My mother had the special job of watering the palm tree and I had to strictly observe the rule, of which I was constantly reminded, that it was absolutely forbidden to touch the leaves otherwise they would wither and die. Nobody told me why this might happen; the palm tree simply could not bear to be touched.

As a result of this unsatisfactory explanation, no other palm tree anywhere in the world may have been so frequently touched and caressed. Of course I did it surreptitiously, every day over many years. My intention was not to cause the leaves to wither; on the contrary, I loved the tree very much. At the time I had the habit of spending time under a table with my older sister's atlas, tracing my finger over maps of unfamiliar countries. The tablecloth hanging down from the table formed a sort of tent and the large palm tree lent a touch of the exotic to my travels. Despite my tactile attentions to the tree, it kept on growing beautifully until it got so big that it took up too much space in the room so my parents decided to sell it. An elderly gentleman replied to the newspaper advertisement and said he wanted to buy it as a present for his daughter who had just passed her school leaving certificate. He said he owned a large apartment and the palm tree would have ample space in the lounge where there was only a piano. A cart arrived and the driver, with the help of the concierge, loaded it up and it soon disappeared from view. I noticed that my parents had tears in their eyes. Much later I learnt that the palm tree had been a wedding present from my father to my mother.

Other occasions to demonstrate my disobedience were provided by Christmas and Easter. The whole family assisted by uncles and aunts would spend a few days in the kitchen making all sorts of cakes. I gladly offered my help in mixing the batter with a large wooden spoon in a special bowl. It was generally believed that the batter had to be mixed in only one direction otherwise the ingredients wouldn't blend properly but collect at the bottom so the cake wouldn't rise but remain flat. So I started mixing in only one direction but as soon as I noticed that nobody was looking, I started mixing in the opposite direction. The cake was always a success and rose well; I remember the taste to this day. The doubts I entertained that mixing the batter in only one direction would have some sort of positive effect on the quality of the cake remained with me for a long time. Later in life I met an engineer who designed various food mixers and other mixing machines and he assured me after a long discussion that the direction of the mixing had no effect on the quality of the end product.

I would be interested to know how my readers judge my capricious childhood. I suggest two possibilities and leave you to choose.

What a horrible little boy brat! Disobedient, contrary, having no trust in his own parents who would have known many things but at times may not have been able to provide scientific arguments but

who nevertheless had amassed considerable experience over many generations. His malice made him carry out dangerous experiments which might have led to withered palm trees or tasteless cakes.

It was a classic case of blind experimentalism reflecting a psychological need to prove that he knew better even though he had no grounds for thinking so. His behaviour reflected a degree of unjustified conceit, a far too high opinion of himself and at the same time self-satisfaction in his ability to deceive adults – in sum, a small boy with a large number of negative characteristics which did not augur well for the future. It would be worth thinking how these negative traits might have been eradicated in his early upbringing. A certain lady suggested a very simple method; “if I had caught him mixing the batter in both directions, I would have taught him a lesson he’d remember for the rest of his life so that he’d never think of doing something similar again. Society demands discipline which must be inculcated in childhood. The modern way of raising children, ‘do as you please’ leads to catastrophic results”. It is interesting that even before the war there were also brats who behaved like the products of such modern methods of upbringing.

But others I talked to were more favourable towards this awful little boy – if we may retain the same wording. “I think” somebody else said, “that this is a rare example of an inherent critical faculty which is not often found in a traditional family upbringing, a refusal to accept things on trust but always to demand proof. Such people always try to experiment. Schooling may serve to strengthen this approach to reality provided there are teachers in sympathy with it. Such children grow up into adults who are immune to indoctrination of all kinds, be they political, religious or scientific. They keep a little apart from society, incapable of sharing in the general enthusiasm for dogmas or worship of leaders. Their individuality and critical distance easily brings them into conflict, especially with those whose credulity tempts them to accept unsupported and non-proven beliefs.”

I think that somewhere between these two extremes you will find a portrait of the author of these lines. May I add that my character has not changed at all during my whole life, which goes to prove the truth of Wordsworth’s line, “the child is father of the man”.