

# Prologue

For a student of geology, flying in a small plane for the first time from Nairobi, Kenya, down to Kigoma, a town in western Tanzania at the edge of Lake Tanganyika, must be an exciting experience. Africa can seem like a mythical, magical place to any newcomer; but for someone interested in geology, that flight from Nairobi to Kigoma is a real-life classroom lesson at one of the most spectacular geological features in the world: the East African Rift.

The Rift! Where immense subterranean forces have slowly, during the last 25 million years, ripped open a deep gash in the crust of the earth. And when, on a clear day, you ride in that small, bouncing plane southwest from Nairobi to Kigoma, you may at some point be able to imagine reaching out and down to touch the rift, which from high enough above can look like a painful wound in the planetary skin. You'll discover as well, as you begin to move above the western edge of Tanzania, a place where that great wound has filled up with water, blue and glistening, and become Lake Tanganyika. You will also recognize that the high escarpment rising up so abruptly on the eastern shore of the lake is a stressed, compressed, and eroded edge of that giant piece of torn skin.

The airstrip at Kigoma is where you'll land, and you can walk or be driven down to the lake and take a boat north for a couple of hours until you disembark at one of the biologically richest and best-known forests in the world: the Gombe forest, which grows right there on the rift escarpment. It is an elongated rectangle of thick and tangled vegetation

situated on the rift's moving edge, with one long side lapped by the waters of the lake while the other long side extends 725 meters up a series of rough and ragged reaches to meet the high Tanzanian plateau. Gombe's exceptionally rugged terrain was created by the flow of numerous streams that gather at that high plateau and descend, east to west, to the lake below—in the process, and over millions of years, scouring out numerous complex valleys. Fifteen of the streams are important enough to have been given names, which are also the names of the valleys. One of the southernmost streams is known as the Gombe Stream, which for unknown reasons has become the name of the larger ecosystem. And because the escarpment face exposes a few strata of especially hard rock, the streams tumble over cliffs and break into high waterfalls at a somewhat predictable point as they slide on their way down to the lake.

This special forest has long been protected from human intrusion not merely by its remoteness and terrain but also by cultural traditions and political decisions. The local Ha people, the Waha, may have regarded the Gombe forest as generally forbidden territory because it was said to include the sacred lairs of their formidable earth spirits. The Germans, who arrived in the late nineteenth century and claimed a good deal of East Africa as their own, formalized that early protection by defining boundaries and declaring the Gombe forest a special reserve for chimpanzees. With the collapse of the German colonial empire at the end of World War I, the British, working under a League of Nations mandate, took over the governance of Tanganyika Territory and, smartly following the German tradition, continued protecting that small rectangular forest at the western edge of their new territory, identifying it as the Gombe Stream Chimpanzee Reserve.

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Tanganyika was still a British mandate and Gombe still described as a chimpanzee reserve when, in the summer of 1960, a twenty-six-year-old Englishwoman named Jane Goodall arrived. Accompanied by her mother, Vanne, and a recently hired African cook, Dominic Bandora, the young Miss Goodall pitched her tent in the forest not far from the shore of the lake and began her plan to study the chimpanzees. This improbable expedition was formally sponsored by the great paleoanthropologist Dr. Louis Leakey, but Jane Goodall had no scientific training. In fact, she had been Leakey's secretary, and she arrived at Gombe having no clear idea about how to go about studying the elusive apes. Neither, for that matter, had anyone else. No one had ever before observed

wild chimpanzees to any degree, except perhaps for the one person who managed to publish a brief scientific account of them based on a few weeks of scattered observations done while crouching anxiously inside carefully constructed blinds. The precaution made good sense. As everyone knew, chimpanzees are immensely strong, emotionally volatile, and extremely dangerous.

Jane Goodall thought differently, though, and she tried a different approach. Instead of hiding, she let herself be seen. She moved through the forest without stealth. She showed herself openly, never acted fearful, and tried never to provoke fear. Gradually, and over several months, several of the apes became more or less bored with her nonthreatening presence, and gradually they began showing themselves to her. She was taming them, and in the process of doing so, she opened up for the first time in history the hidden world of wild chimpanzees. It was a remarkable accomplishment for which the young Englishwoman became world famous. Her fame happened quickly, assisted by a startling *National Geographic* magazine article that appeared in August 1963. Her reputation as a brilliant pioneering scientist developed at a slower pace, although she had already begun her studies at Cambridge University that would lead to a doctorate in 1965.

By the end of the decade, Dr. Jane Goodall was married to the Dutch wildlife photographer Baron Hugo van Lawick and had become the doting mother of an infant son. The ambitiously overextended mother and father were trying to care for their son, conduct field and photography studies in the East African savannas, write a number of scientific and popular books and articles, and continue the chimpanzee studies at Gombe. It was a challenging time, in short, made more so because their only significant funding source, the National Geographic Society, was starting to withdraw its support. In spite of a limited and unreliable budget, however, the van Lawick–Goodalls had already established a data-gathering routine at Gombe and were bringing in volunteers and students and young scientists to run the operation while striving to establish the connections and organization that would transform the original tented camp into a major scientific field station for animal behavior studies.

Then came a tragic event that marked the final summer of that promising first decade. At around noon, on Saturday, July 12, 1969, Ruth Davis, a young American working as a volunteer at the research site, walked out of camp to follow a chimpanzee into the forest and never returned. Six days later, her body was found floating in a pool at the base of a high waterfall.

Although Dr. Goodall was not in camp at the time, several young researchers and workers were. They were shocked and profoundly saddened by that event. Two of the researchers, Geza Teleki and Carole Gale, were devastated. Geza, who was Ruth's lover, happened to be in the United States at the time she disappeared, having been called back by his draft board for the physical examination preceding induction into the U.S. Army. Carole had been in camp on July 12 when Ruth disappeared, but she was feverish and bedridden from malaria and thus missed the first frantic days of the search for her missing colleague. At the end of the third day, however, Ruth appeared to Carole in a vision, one that felt entirely real, angrily demanding that Carole go find her. Carole obediently rose from her bed the next morning and, still weak from malaria, joined the search. Within three days, she had discovered the body, thereby accomplishing what well over a hundred others—the original search party having been expanded by dozens of regional police, camp and park staff, local fishermen, and area schoolchildren—had failed to do.

Both Geza and Carole were haunted by Ruth's death, their lives permanently altered. Both had shared with Ruth a quiet friendship and a secret perspective or insight, a gnosis perhaps—an extraordinary understanding of the chimpanzees, a special recognition that only the three of them shared, because only those three had spent many hours, days, and even weeks walking alone in the forest with those animals. In doing so, in moving out of the human world and into the forest world of the apes, they had begun to break through the psychological barrier that normally separates one species from another. They had developed strong personal attachments, genuine friendships, with individual chimpanzees; and in that way the chimpanzees became for the first time real to them, no longer faint spirits passing through from another dimension.

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My own connection with this story began in 1989, twenty years after Ruth's death, when Jane Goodall was traveling regularly to Washington, DC, as part of a campaign—as one of the world's top experts on wild chimpanzees—to lobby members of Congress concerning the fate of chimps as determined by the U.S. Animal Welfare and Endangered Species Acts. She was profoundly concerned about the inappropriate and too often cruel and abusive treatment of chimpanzees in American biomedical research laboratories. She was also provoked by some clear indications of an international campaign within the research industry that would effectively circumvent recent legal protections limiting the destruc-

tive trade in live chimpanzees taken out of Africa. To assist her with her campaign and the political lobbying, Dr. Goodall had a colleague who lived in Washington and provided her with an office and pied-à-terre—his house—whenever she came to town. That colleague was Dr. Geza Teleki.

I was a writer hoping to write a book about chimpanzees and looking for experts to consult. Jane and Geza were experts hoping to create a book about chimps and looking for a writer to help. By the summer of 1989, the three of us had formed a partnership in order to produce a book that would detail some of the events and circumstances endangering wild chimps in Africa and expose the unethical treatment of captive chimps outside of Africa. I was to be the lead author and occasional investigator. Jane would be the second author. Geza would support us both with his own research and expertise and an enormous heap of documents stashed in a half dozen filing cabinets in his house. We had a good publisher lined up, and work was proceeding apace on a book that finally appeared in 1993 as *Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People*.

As for the distinctive name Geza Teleki, its national origin became clear to me after a casual look at objects scattered around his house in Washington. The old Hungarian paper money pressed under the glass top of the coffee table, for example. Or the sheet of antique Hungarian stamps framed and hung on a wall, each stamp a portrait of some aged gent in uniform looking inspired and wearing old-fashioned circular eyeglasses, the image repeated several times across and down à la Andy Warhol. Only later, after having made a number of trips down to Washington to confer with Geza—sitting across from him in his living room with the Hungarian-money coffee table between us, trying to figure out which of Geza’s oddly divergent eyes to pay attention to, listening to the elaborate sentences as they rolled trippingly off his tongue, noting the occasional interruptions made by that bitter laugh of his—did I realize that the old man immortalized on the sheet of postage stamps was his grandfather.

Sometime after that I learned that his grandfather, Paul Teleki (or Pál Janos Ede Count Teleki de Szék), a Hungarian and Transylvanian count from a storied aristocratic family, was pictured on the stamps because he had twice been prime minister of Hungary. Eventually, I learned that Geza’s father, Count Géza Teleki de Szék, had played field hockey in the 1936 Olympics and served as Hungarian minister of education during World War II. Ultimately, I discovered that Geza’s prime minister grandfather had, at the start of that war, admitted to his most obvious foreign

policy failure by shooting himself dead in the parliament building on the day the Nazi tanks rolled in. If history had gone one way, in other words, Geza might have become a dashing Hungarian and Transylvanian count, complete with castles and grand estates and all the rest. History went another way, and the family—young Geza, his father and mother—escaped in 1949 with little more than their own lives from the Soviet masters who had taken over Hungary.

That family background helped explain Geza's occasionally imperious manner, which could be off-putting. And yet, I thought, he and Jane together made a good pair. They were both charismatic individuals with strong personalities who seemed to balance and support one another. She had the understated style and social grace. He had the physical presence and political instinct. They seemed to make an effective yin and yang. I knew nothing at the time about the ghosts of Geza's past.

In any event, working on that book was the beginning of my education about chimpanzees. In America, I toured research labs and zoos and thereby discovered some tolerable situations and a few horrific ones. I met private owners of chimps and investigated the exploitation of apes for the entertainment industry in Hollywood and Las Vegas. I had traveled in Africa before and written earlier about African primates; researching this new book took me back to Africa for investigations and travel across eight nations in East, West, and Central Africa. I witnessed the breaking open of the great Congo Basin rain forest by men riding giant machines. I discovered young orphaned chimps held in crude cages or chained in junkyards and at doghouses. I saw the beginnings of a commercial trade in exotic meats for middle-class gourmets in urban Africa that would, within a few years, result in the slaughter of tens of thousands of chimpanzees and gorillas. And once Geza, in his role as guide and researcher and mentor, began pulling out his files and documents that identified the various excuses, abuses, cons, and conspiracies having to do with the human exploitation of chimpanzees for entertainment and biomedical research in the United States and parts of Europe, I began to appreciate the extent and complexity of what I was witnessing: the usually distressing and sometimes criminally perverse relationship between humans and their closest living relatives.

Those are some of the things Geza and I explored together during the writing of that book, and the shared knowledge and experience made us first colleagues, then friends. But I never felt that our friendship was an easy one. His laugh communicated irony rather than amusement. He had a grief and grievances to consider, most of which I only later began

to understand. And yet we had traveled together, in an intellectual and emotional sense, and we had both stopped to drink at the same bitter stream. We had developed a common perspective, in short, a mutual understanding substantive enough that not long after his personal crisis came in September 2006, he thought to telephone me: “Dale, I need to talk.” He wanted to talk about Ruth.

The conversation started slowly and continued, in intermittent bursts, for a few years, so that altogether I spent many days visiting him and his wife, Heather, in their new home in Bethesda, Maryland, listening to his story. Since we had agreed at the start that the story might become material for a book, our conversations turned into hours of tape-recorded interviews, and they led to other people and other interviews. Most especially, Geza introduced me to Carole Gale, who, as I noted earlier, had been a friend of his and Ruth’s at Gombe in 1968 and 1969 and had been the one to discover Ruth’s body. I came to like and admire Carole a great deal and to consider her a friend as well.

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I have not yet described the state of Geza’s health. Geza was dying during the period of our conversations, probably from having been poisoned. His thyroid was damaged. He had developed diabetes. His kidneys had failed, and so he was on dialysis for two years before his wife, Heather, gave him one of hers. He then got colon cancer. His immune system was compromised, and the antirejection drugs he took after the organ transplant accelerated his downward spiral, making him supremely vulnerable to every random bug. One of those delivered an end to his suffering in January 2015.

The poisoning was, Geza concluded, the consequence of many years spent living in suburban Washington, DC, in an older house situated downhill from American University. During World War I, American University had leased parts of its campus to the U.S. Army, which then created the second-largest chemical warfare laboratory and production operation in the world. Around twelve hundred army chemists there experimented with some of the most lethal substances known to humankind. They secured the substances inside munitions and containers next to tethered goats and dogs, and then they blew up the munitions and containers. When the air cleared, the researchers rushed out to see how quickly and in what gruesome ways the goats and dogs had died. They were producing hundreds of pounds of deadly toxins each day, sealing them inside artillery shells, mortar rounds, and glass jugs and storing

them in large ceramic carboys. And in the end, after the war was over, they had a disposal problem, which the army solved in part by dropping their contaminated leftovers into deep pits on the college campus. Among the worst of the deadly compounds experimented on was Lewisite, an oily, colorless liquid smelling faintly of geraniums and based significantly on the better-known poison arsenic, which can persist indefinitely in the soil and groundwater.

That might clarify why all of Geza's son's pet mice died such strange deaths: popping up like roasted marshmallows, exploding slowly from the inside out. It could explain why their dog died young of thyroid disease. It may explain Geza's thyroid failure, followed by diabetes and kidney failure. He wrote several times to the army requesting that they test the soils on his property. At first they refused. When they finally came, they did so, he told me, in secret. He began appealing to the army to learn the results and also writing to the Environmental Protection Agency, then getting official notes of reassurance. Finally, the full report was released, and everything began to make sense. He went to see an expert at Johns Hopkins medical center, who told him to get out of his house. In 2003, the three of them—Geza, Heather, and their son, Aidan—moved from Washington to Bethesda, Maryland. That was too late for Geza. By the time he and I began the work that would lead to this book, he was dying a slow and painful death.

Carole Gale, too, was very ill when I interviewed her over several days near the end of August 2009. She was by then living with good friends in Oregon. She had been diabetic for many years, and so she was keeping track of her blood sugar and giving herself shots of insulin; but now she was also weak from cancer. She had decided to stop the standard medical treatments and instead was working to build up her body and support her immune system. She was eating raw food and getting nutrients and as many enzymes as possible by eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, as well as consuming Celtic sea salt and extra minerals.

Carole had planned to write her own book about Ruth and Gombe, and then Geza got in touch. Carole went to meet him in Bethesda and stayed at the house for a few days, and they talked about coauthoring a book. But then they recognized that, by themselves, they lacked the time and also perhaps the energy to write their story. As Geza had done, so Carole, too, spoke to me with passion and eloquence. She, too, was chastened by an awareness that her life was approaching its end.

I was moved by Carole's courage and Geza's anguish, and by the complicated story they felt compelled to tell, and I was honored to be a friend



and serve as a confidant. We three were close contemporaries, and the developing narrative had, for me, a personal resonance: it seemed to be a generational tale, one with echoes of the war in Vietnam, social conflict and political assassinations at home, and the formative experience of reaching adulthood during the painful and exciting 1960s. The tragedy of someone dying so young and so suddenly, as Ruth did, is always wrenching, but I found I also strongly identified with Ruth, who began to come alive for me through photographs, correspondence, and the memories and writings of others.

As my reflections about Ruth and my conversations with Geza and Carole and others who were there continued to develop, though, I recognized that the story was carrying me beyond essentially personal interests and pushing me to explore the more complex knots of cultural conflict and social fragmentation, the dystopian dynamic that becomes possible when people from divergent backgrounds and orientations are forced to live in great intimacy and isolation simultaneously. Possibly, I imagined, *The Ghosts of Gombe* might best be regarded as a collective or cultural biography. But if so, I began to recognize, it would also be one anchored in science and the history of science—albeit a history from the bottom up: a portrait of life at a remote field station told largely from the perspective of the volunteers, students, and young scientists, many of them still endeavoring to make the challenging transition from eager amateur to seasoned professional while laboring to carry the science forward under difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances.

And yet, of course, the central problem of this extended reconstruction of a time long ago and a place far away is much simpler and stranger than all that. It is the haunting, the loss Geza and Carole, I and many others still living have struggled with for too long now to understand. It is the death of a beautiful young person of promise in what should have been the best time of her life. How did it happen? Why?