

It Changed My Life

# Don't cook monkeys, but smoke them

Yossi Ghinsberg on the lessons learnt looking for gold, then being lost in the Amazon



Wong Kim Hoh

Senior Writer

If he were stranded in the wilderness with a corpse and no other food available, Yossi Ghinsberg believes he would eat human flesh.

"I would eat my own family if it was just a body. There is something sacred about preservation of life, it's more sacred than the preservation of body," he says.

But he won't kill. "There's a line you just don't cross."

It's not hypothetical chatter from a pompous 59-year-old.

The Israeli multi-hyphenate (author, entrepreneur, adventurer, motivational speaker) made international headlines in 1981 when he got lost for three weeks in the remote Bolivian Amazon.

With no supplies, knife or equipment, he fended off predators including jaguars, was attacked by fire ants and nearly drowned because of torrential floods.

Feet rotting from a fungi infection and body ravaged by a virus, he survived by "eating snakes, snails and whatever I could".

"You will get past repulsion or anything that can disgust you. You will eat cockroaches or rats, you will do anything."

He survived not only to tell his tale but also become "a bigger person". He wrote *Jungle: A Harrowing True Story Of Survival*, which has sold several million copies, been translated into 20 languages, and adapted into a film, *Jungle*, starring Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe.

One of Twitter's 20 Most Inspiring People in 2012, he also opened a string of centres for opioid addiction in different parts of the world, became a technopreneur and motivational speaker.

Ghinsberg, who was in Singapore recently to speak at the SIM Business Insights - Transformation Series, was born and raised in Tel Aviv in Israel. He is the younger of two sons; his parents, Romanian immigrants, were Holocaust survivors.

His father was dispatched to a German-run labour camp in Siberia during World War II and witnessed many atrocities including a baby being killed after it was snatched from its mother.

Although the elder Ghinsberg came from a well-to-do merchant family in Romania, he spent a good many years working as a gas installer in Israel before saving enough money to buy a small gas-ket factory.

"Because of what he went through, he just wanted to upset God. He would eat pork, work instead of rest on the Sabbath, and feast instead of fast on Yom Kippur," his son says, referring to the Jewish Day of Atonement.

Unlike his father, Ghinsberg has had a more spiritual relationship with Judaism, thanks to an uncle who was a rabbi. "I was very close to him," says the best-selling author who remembers being summoned to his uncle's home when he was 18 and drafted into the army. "He said

he had something to give me."

Expecting a watch or a nice folding knife, he was disappointed when his uncle pulled a little booklet - containing Kabbalistic verses and symbols - out of his wallet. Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition of Jewish mysticism.

"He said: 'This has protected me all my life but I'm now old. I'm giving this to you because you're young and you're going into the army.' I disguised my disappointment but I felt cheated."

Upon reaching home an hour later, he found his mother wailing and rolling about on the floor.

"She said: 'Your uncle has just died.' My uncle was 83 but was extremely strong and had a full head of white hair. He died during the time I took to get home. Suddenly the booklet took on a whole new significance," says Ghinsberg, who believes the book - which he had with him during his Amazon ordeal - was what kept him alive.

Growing up, he read voraciously and was a huge fan of Papillon, an autobiographical novel by Frenchman Henri Charriere chronicling his imprisonment and escape from a penal colony in French Guiana.

Like Charriere, Ghinsberg longed to embark on a big adventure.

"But my sense of adventure was naive and romantic," he confesses with a big laugh. "I'm not an achiever, I didn't want to conquer a mountain. I wanted to find indigenous people in the forest, fall in love with a tribal chief's daughter and be one of them."

So after completing his national service in the Israeli navy, he set off for his big adventure in South America. To fund it, he worked, among other things, as a construction labourer in Norway and a fisherman in Alaska.

He saved a tidy bundle after beavering away for eight months but lost it all in one night in Las Vegas. "I'd never been in a casino before that but I lost every cent of the US\$6,000 or US\$7,000 I'd saved up. I just stood there and cried."

Fortunately, a friend referred him to his uncle in New York, who had a business shipping old records to Africa. "He bought me a ticket to New York and I worked for him for several months. I slept in his container trucks at night to save money on hotels."

After finally making it to South America in 1981, he met a Swiss schoolteacher, Marcus Stamm, one morning in Colombia.

The Swiss had missed a ferry that Ghinsberg was on but, for some unknown reason, the captain decided to turn the vessel back to the jetty to pick Stamm up.

"If the captain hadn't gone back, my life would have been very different," says the amiable adventurer.

He struck up a friendship with the teacher who persuaded him to cross the border into La Paz, the administrative capital of Bolivia.

"It was the last few weeks of his year-long break and he convinced me to spend them with him before he went back to Switzerland. I only went to Bolivia because of this guy," Ghinsberg says.

On the streets of La Paz, he crossed paths with a shady Austrian, Karl Rupprechter, who claimed to be a geologist but was actually a conman wanted by the Austrian authorities for robbing a post office. Rupprechter told Ghinsberg he was planning an expedition into the Amazon to look for gold and a lost tribe.

Because he was such a good storyteller and seemed so knowledgeable about the Amazonian wilderness, the then-21-year-old Israeli fell under his spell.

He decided he wanted in on the adventure, and persuaded Stamm and Kevin Gale, an American photographer, to come along.

The quartet made their way to the Tuichi River and stopped in a re-



Above: Yossi Ghinsberg reckons he has reached a point where he does not need to search anymore, saying: "When you let go of self-importance, you become bigger. When you lose your ego, you start serving."

Left: The Israeli lost more than 12 kg during his Amazon ordeal. PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, YOSSI GHINSBERG

**Inspiring others after jungle ordeal**

http://str.sg/yossi

mote tribal village in Asariamas to stock up on supplies before going further into the rainforest in search of gold, despite advice by the indigenous folks not to.

Their supplies ran out and they had to eat monkeys.

"You don't cook monkeys, you have to smoke them. You flatten the body, tie it to bamboo over a fire and only eat it the next day. Karl knew how to do it," he says.

Stamm refused to eat monkey meat and grew progressively weaker. They abandoned their plan and returned to Asariamas where Rupprechter hatched a new plan to

go by raft to a gold quarry in Curiplaya before they make their way back to La Paz.

Things soon started unravelling. Rupprechter's lies caught up with him, especially when he said he didn't want to continue with the trip because he couldn't swim.

The group split up. Ghinsberg and Gale continued on the raft to make their way back to civilisation, while Rupprechter and Stamm decided to do it by walking up along the Ipurama River. The Austrian and the Swiss were never heard from again.

The saga didn't end there. Ghinsberg and Gale lost control of their

raft which smashed against a rock near a waterfall. The American made it to shore and was later rescued by fishermen.

Clinging on to the raft, Ghinsberg went over the waterfall and downriver. Hurt and battered from keeping his head above water and smashing into rocks and tree trunks, he managed to make it to the riverbank but was soon swallowed up in the belly of the Amazon.

"When I got lost, I felt that I deserved it because I had betrayed my friend," he says, referring to Stamm whom he "abandoned" to go with Gale, who was fitter and stronger.

So began his 20-day ordeal. The dampness and the constant trekking wore the skin off his feet which soon succumbed to a nasty fungal infection.

Each day, he had to fend off jaguars, snakes, wild boars, leeches, termites and other nasties.

To make matters worse, Mother Nature then unleashed horrendous floods, nearly drowning him on two occasions.

"When they make movies based on real stories, they usually make it 10 times larger than life. In my case, they made it smaller because they didn't have the budget," he says referring to *Jungle*, filmmaker Greg McLean's 2017 cinematic adaptation of his survival story.

Despite the nightmare, Ghinsberg says he was "strong mentally and did not crumble emotionally".

"A healthy person would fight to cling on to life. People who went through the Holocaust hung on through extreme conditions because life is sacred and goes beyond the physical."

The only times he almost gave up hope was when search planes passed overhead, oblivious to his cries, and when he found himself sinking in a swamp.

"In the swamp, I thought about suicide for the first time. Then, I thought to myself: 'This is the 19th day. If you wanted to kill yourself, you should have done it on the first day.'"

Helping him through the ordeal was a young tribal woman who, he insists, was not a figment of his fevered imagination. "I consider her a true miracle... Initially I thought I was insane. I would talk to her although she wouldn't respond," he says. "But she was young and fragile and I felt I had to

help her and take care of her. That responsibility gave me strength to carry on in my weakest moments."

Ghinsberg was rescued on the 20th day by Gale, who had managed to get himself to a settlement. He pressured the authorities to send search planes, and when that proved futile, enlisted the help of a tribal man with a boat to look for Ghinsberg in the forests.

The duo were about to turn back after a long search when Ghinsberg spotted their boat.

With deep conviction, the author reckons his experience and his survival in the Amazon was an act of providence. "I never had one nightmare after that, not one session of therapy," he says.

But the ordeal awakened in him a spiritual hunger; he travelled the world in search of spiritual experiences. "My life became a life of search," says Ghinsberg, who has four children, aged between eight and 33, from three marriages.

"I left everything - my career, my family and country - and went back on the road in search of experiences," adds the adventurer who stayed at ashrams in India, and sought out shamans in other parts of the world.

Meanwhile, his book, which has gone into multiple reprints, made him a national hero in Israel and a sought-after speaker on the international circuit.

"It gave me many opportunities to touch many people. I'm not afraid to touch big ideas," says Ghinsberg who has gone back to Bolivia to help the indigenous Uchupiamonas de San Jose community, building an eco-lodge called Chalalan with the villagers as owners.

He has set up several eco-friendly businesses, and also organised music festivals to promote Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. He even became a technopreneur, and went into app development, albeit with little success.

"Life has been filled with difficulties, adversities. I've felt crushed more than once. But if you rise, you become stronger," he says.

He reckons he has reached a point where he does not need to search anymore, saying: "When you let go of self-importance, you become bigger. When you lose your ego, you start serving."