

Volkan on Animals and Birds #2

The Birds of Cyprus: a Psychopolitical Observation By Vamık D. Volkan

(For an enlarged version of this paper please see: Volkan, Vamık D. 1979. *Cyprus - War and Adaptation: A Psychoanalytic History of Two Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Foreword by John E. Mack. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia.

This is a report of how a community under social and political limitations became exaggeratedly preoccupied with the propagation and care of birds -- in this case parakeets -- in a strikingly reflection of an ancient symbolism. This unconscious dramatization of the simile “free as a bird” or “happy as a bird on the wing” adds to our knowledge of group reaction to disastrous external events of the sort that limit freedom of motion and threaten both physical and psychologic well-being.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Mediterranean island of Cyprus has been a hotly contested prize since 1500 B.C. because of its rich deposits of ore and its strategic location off the coast of Asia Minor. Mycenaean Greeks colonized the island, and Phoenicians and Achaean Greeks set up independent city states there. Cyprus was dominated by a long series of alien conquerors -- Egyptians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, the Crusaders, the Frankish kings, the Genoese, Venetians, the Ottoman Turks -- and, finally, by the British before the establishment in 1960 of the Republic of Cyprus. However, except for the Greeks in the Bronze Age and the Turks, who prevailed between 1571 and 1878, alien cultures and peoples left few lasting traces.

The Turkish occupation of more than three centuries accounts for the fact that Turks are outnumbered only by Greeks in the Cypriot population of today. From the Ottoman days until the present, a dichotomy has existed between the Greek and Turkish communities on the island. Their differences are both religious and ethnic.

It is outside the scope of this report to review historical and political aspects of the British rule (1 - 4). Cyprus did, however, achieve independence in August, 1960, following an upsurge of resistance against the British. At that time a special constitution divided governmental power between the Greek and Turkish communities and provided protective regulations for the other minorities. It soon became evident, however, that this solution left many problems unresolved between the two dominant ethnic groups. In 1963, violence between the two broke out, and the issue was brought before the United Nations, which sent a U.N. force to the island to keep the peace. The representation from the U.N. is still there.

THE BIRDS OF CYPRUS

During and after the open hostilities between the two communities in Cyprus in 1963 and 1964, the Turks in many areas had to flee for safety, joining others of their countrymen in enclaves (cantons) which were surrounded by U.N. troops in a kind of house arrest within their communities until the summer of 1968, when freedom to enter the Greek sections and to travel from one enclave to another was assured, although the U.N. troops continued to surround the Turkish communities. The largest Turkish canton is the one in Nicosia, which includes part of the capital city and the northern villages and mountains. It was crowded with immigrants from other parts of Cyprus and many

residents were obliged to share their homes with relatives and friends. For most people, however, the surroundings were familiar, and the anxiety of being threatened by an enemy was modified by the hope of ultimately being saved by Turkey. It was in this balance of hardship and hope that so many people in the Turkish section of Nicosia adopted the hobby of raising parakeets.

The birds were kept in cages, usually with several generations represented in each. One home, for example, had 16 in three cages. Everyone saw the parakeets as individuals, and felt a keen interest in their pedigrees. One crippled bird was a special pet. People were delighted when their birds were happy and fertile. The owners mourned with extravagant and sorrowful pride the death of one who, it was claimed, as spent herself in the production and hatching of an uncommonly large number of eggs. And it was not only in the home that birds were being raised with such enthusiasm -- one saw them in coffee houses, markets, and other public places.

My visit to Nicosia in the summer of 1968 was my first in many years. Since my relatives had gone through so much since we had last seen one another, and so many changes had taken place, I was surprised that when we first met I was greeted, not with an outpouring of family tidings, but with the news about the birds they were raising. Although I found this somewhat disconcerting, it was plain that to others it was perfectly natural. At that time I had 21 days to observe the birds of Cyprus and their meaning to the people. I have since had ample evidence of the abatement of this enthusiasm for apiculture once greater freedom was allowed and the Turkish Cypriots once more were permitted to enter the Greek quarter and to travel elsewhere throughout the island.

DISCUSSION

The Symbolism of Birds

Before formulating suggestion about the psychodynamics of this mass hobby, the symbolic meaning of birds should be recognized. It should be remembered that during medieval times birds became an obsession. Like leaves and flowers, they were seen as discrete designs of nature, and appeared in one of the earliest known medieval sketchbooks. The fourteenth century cleric who embellished his manuscript with them would probably have explained that they represented souls because they could fly up to God. Clark (5), in his studies of civilization as it is mirrored in art, makes the appropriate suggestion that the obsession with birds arose from identifying them with freedom. Feudal man was tied, along with his animals, to the land, living out his life within one small locality. Freedom to move about was given to few, but birds could escape confinement. Birds were cheerful, hopeful, impudent, and highly mobile -- and their markings made them adaptable for the decorative heraldry of the Middle Ages.

In the dreams of patients undergoing psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, birds not only may represent the penis, which, like the bird, can “go up”, but -- in symbolism unrelated to body parts -- the ideational aspect of individuation and freedom.

In treating schizophrenic and borderline patients who dreamed of themselves as birds, Corney and I (6) recalled the myth of Icarus, who was advised by his father, Daedalus, not to soar too high nor swoop too low. The first admonition has long been understood in relation to the oedipal conflict. We dealt with the second, which represents the dilemma of separation-individuation. In our reporting of these dreams we noted that the patient saw himself as a bird, his flight representing efforts and failures in the

achievement of individuation and intrapsychic separation from the symbiotic mother. Unresolved problems of separation-individuation (psychic freedom) are involved. W.G. Niederland (personal communication, 1971) analyzed a patient with a congenital torticollis who felt literally “entrapped in a cage” due to his serious deformity. He had many dreams in which he was a bird flying freely in the world.

Certain folkways give further evidence of the symbolic meaning of birds. In some Peruvian villages, for example, teams of men go up into the mountains before a fiesta to trap the condors of the Andes. They sacrifice an old stock animal as bait for the big bird. When they catch a condor they tie its beak shut and return with it to the village for a showdown between the bird and a bull. On the fourth day of the fiesta, events reach a climax. Then the condor “rides” the bull in a furious contest fraught with symbolism, for the condor, like the Incas, represents the Indian, and the bull, brought into the mountains by the Conquistadors, represents the foreign invader. In the end, both animals are released (7).

Contemporary writings acknowledge the symbolism also. *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (8) invested his birds with his desire for freedom. In a recent children’s book (9), being “free like a bird” is poetically and graphically elaborated, and the old *Peter Pan* (10) story has essentially the same symbolism. Maya Angelou (11) calls her poignant account of black childhood and youth in a community in the United States then wholly dominated by whites *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and uses the symbol to express very much what the bird hobby meant to the Cypriot Turks.

Brief Psychodynamic Formulation

In view of such argument for the symbolism invested in birds, I suggest that the parakeets treasured by the Cypriot Turks represented the Turks themselves. The birds were kept as families, in a representation of the traditional “extended” or “modified extended” Turkish family, characteristics of which Ozturk and I (12) have described elsewhere. Cages, like the Turks confined within their cantons, the birds were externalized representations of the people. The feeling of being in need of care, which the Cypriot Turk experienced, was displaced to the birds he cared for. This displacement bolstered the repression of his own feeling of want. As long as the little creatures sang, remained fertile, and were looked after, they embodied the hope that the human population might also thrive and receive care. Anxiety created by the sociopolitical stress was thus allayed the actualization of the old concept of a bird’s free nature, as familiar in Turkish expression as in the English phrases we have used. An externalization of the conflict and its solution, birds provided a safety valve for mass anxiety. In their dilemma, the Turks of Cyprus had become what could be described as helpless helpers; as long as they could help their birds to be happy and fruitful they could entertain the hope that they themselves would receive help.

The Role of Hope

At the beginning of their siege the Cypriot Turks actually believed that Turkey would come to their aid. The bombing of Cyprus by Turkish aircraft in August of 1964 put a stop to actual violence and battle, and supported this notion. Subsequent help was largely limited to political activity, however; the physical situation of the Turkish cantons was not improved. Hope became chronic and stale. I believe that this chronic hope, as

well as the fact that their “imprisonment” was one in familiar surroundings of a home neighborhood, promoted the type of adaptive defense shown by the preoccupation with birds. The political and social stress was not without hope and its pressures were slow; a measure of consoling normalcy remained against a background of malign possibility. When the situation was internalized, psychologic representations of this stress include the hope of which the adaptive mechanism was evidence. Thus the mass reaction of the Cypriot Turks was unlike that of Jews in concentration camps, since the Jews were faced with a much more overwhelming stress from which hope was entirely absent. Even following their release, the survivors of the camps continued to be without hope, developing the unhappy state for which Niederland (13, 14) coined the term “survivor syndrome”. Since his hope was chronic and not conducive to action, the Cypriot Turk became highly ambivalent toward the “savior” from the mainland.

Regression and Metaphor

In telling about the birds of Cyprus, I refer to the actualization of what is involved in the simile “free as a bird”. The Cypriot Turk did not think, “I want to be free as a bird”, but symbolically became the bird. Here again we need to turn our attention to the mechanism of regression. In schizophrenia, where the regression is deep, and firm ego boundaries missing, the inability to distinguish between metaphorical and literal meanings has been observed (15, 16). The Cypriot Turks were regressed under stress. Regressively formed groups have been studied since the publication of Freud’s (17) *Massenpsychologie*, and differentiated from nonregressive ones (18). The members of regressive groups abdicate some of the judgment they are accustomed to exercise as

individuals, becoming more dependent on external authority than on responsible considerations of their own. The Cypriot Turks lacked a hero to lead them and were obliged to see external authority vested in the abstraction of the expected “savior” from the mainland. They identified themselves with this “savior” as they cared so painstakingly for their birds, which also represented themselves. The stress under which the Turk was acting led him in a regressive way to unconscious identification with the birds and the savior, although without the schizophrenic delusion that he had in his belief become either.

SUMMARY

I have described the development of unique mass hobby -- the raising of parakeets -- among people living in limited freedom under threat. Regression occurred among the Cypriot Turks who tried to externalize their problems of political stress, and who dramatized the simile “free as a bird” as a safety valve for mass anxiety. Mass confinement without hope, seen in concentration camps, yielded to symptoms concerned with hopelessness; but confinement such as that experienced by the Cypriot Turks -- in which it was possible for hope to persist -- yielded to adaptive defenses. These defenses were for the purpose of dealing with long-term stress, since even against the background of continued threat there was comfort to be taken from the familiar environment of home and family.

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