

REPETITIVE ESCAPE NIGHTMARES OF REFUGEES¹

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Summary.—Questionnaire responses of 38 Czechoslovak refugees indicated that 84.2% experienced, at least once, a nightmare about being back in their ex-homeland and trying to escape again. The escape nightmares were most frequent within the first 2 years after escape. A significant decrease in frequency was noted 4 years after escape and during the subsequent years.¹

Recurrent nightmares of adults have neither as yet been satisfactorily explained nor described statistically. While clinical or theoretical analyses such as Freud's ingenious accounts of repetitive anxiety dreams about examinations (4) or of the dynamics of nightmares in war veterans (3) are of much value, more objective data such as descriptive statistics about the incidence, content, and longitudinal changes are needed to facilitate research progress. This study deals with nightmares of refugees.

Refugees from the Soviet-controlled part of Europe suffer from repetitive nightmares in which they are back in their former homeland, meet old friends or family, are in familiar places such as the house or apartment of their parents, and realize that the police might arrest them now or prevent them from leaving the country again. With panic and in distress, they attempt to find means of re-escaping and frequently wake up frightened, exhausted, or depressed. Even though some of the scenes might be very dramatic (e.g., attempts to escape by hiding on the chassis of a railroad car heading for the free West), the nightmares often realistically mirror obstacles erected by the government to keep the citizens in the country (machine gun towers and mine fields on the border, dense patrols by the military, parallel rows of electrically charged fences, etc.). The nightmares were briefly mentioned in sociopsychiatric studies of Hungarian refugees (1, 5) and examined in more detail in an interview study of 100 Czechoslovakian refugees living in Switzerland (2). The latter study suggested that 56% suffered from nightmares about escape. The refugees were interviewed within 4 years after their real-life escape. It is unclear from this study, however, whether and with what frequency the nightmares occur much later after escape and how their frequency and nature change with time. The present study of a new sample of refugees provides preliminary data in this respect.

METHOD

Data were available from 38 Czechoslovak refugees (29 men, 9 women). Their

¹The data were gathered while the author was a doctoral candidate at University of Zuerich, Switzerland. Request reprints from Dr. Cernovsky, St. Thomas Psychiatric Hospital, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada N5P 3V9.

ages ranged from 24 to 71 yr. (mean = 37.5 yr., $SD = 12.1$). All underwent minimally 9 yr. of formal schooling in their homeland; about two-thirds either studied at or completed the university. All lived in Switzerland where the investigation was carried out. The majority had escaped Czechoslovakia about 10 yr. (71.0% of persons) or 9 yr. (21.1%) prior to the study; the remainder (7.9%) only about 1 to 2 yr. later. No measures were available of the refugees' psychological health or adjustment in their homeland. The escape of all participants involved posing as tourists leaving for a short trip abroad, making complex negotiations (over several weeks or months) with the local police to obtain passports and many related mandatory documents, and completing subsequent negotiations with the Swiss police before being granted refugee status and residency permit. The ability to persevere in this difficult process suggests that all were in robust mental health and of at least average intelligence at the time of escape. The sample partly overlaps with the one from an earlier study (2). While it is not possible to determine the extent of overlap (the respondents were anonymous in both studies), a larger proportion of persons from Northern Switzerland participated in the present study than in the earlier one.

The data were gathered using a questionnaire in the Czech language; items dealt with the incidence of sleep disorders, problems of adjustment in the host country, and the real-life conditions of escape. A personality measure of rigidity was also included. Personality, situational, and adjustment correlates of the refugee nightmares are to be dealt with elsewhere; only the data on sleep disorders are described in the present analysis. The questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned by mail.

RESULTS

In response to the item "Have you ever dreamt about being back in Czechoslovakia and wanted to escape again?", 84.2% selected the response "Yes", 5.3% "No", and the remaining 10.5% "Don't know" (don't remember). It should be noted that, while the English translation of the Czech questionnaire item is not fully free of ambiguity (some persons might misunderstand the word "dream" as including daydreams or spontaneous thoughts), concepts used in the Czech wording unambiguously referred to nonwaking dreams.

The respondents were also asked to estimate the frequency of their escape nightmares for each of five 2-yr. periods following escape, using the frequency categories listed on the left side of Table 1. The percentages in this table indicate a steady decrease in frequency of nightmares over the 10-yr. period. This is especially obvious if we focus on the modes (i.e., the most frequently chosen category in each column) as indicated in the table in italics; the mode shifts towards categories indicating lower frequencies over the years. The Wilcoxon matched-pairs, signed-ranks test was used to evaluate statistical significance of this trend. The test was chosen because the sample is too small for a more thorough time series analysis and the measurements are on the ordinal scale level. The test was carried out only on cases for which data for all five time intervals were available ($N = 24$). In the first analysis, the frequency of nightmares from the first 2 yr. was compared with the data for the last 2 yr. Frequencies of nightmares were significantly lower in the latter ($p < .01$,

2-tailed). Then the time intervals were compared in an ascending sequence, pair after pair, i.e., the first time interval with the second one, the second with the third, etc. All four comparisons were significant ($p < .01$, 2-tailed) except that for the first and second intervals ($p > .05$, 2-tailed). This indicates that a significant decrease in the reported incidence of escape nightmares occurs about 4 yr. after escape and decline continues over the subsequent years.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF ESCAPE NIGHTMARES WITHIN 5 TWO-YEAR PERIODS
AFTER ESCAPE: PERCENT RESPONDING

Frequency	Year 1-2	Year 3-4	Year 5-6	Year 7-8	Year 9-10
Once weekly or more often	10.3	12.9	3.4	3.3	3.6
At least					
Once a month	34.5	19.4	17.2	3.3	3.6
Every 3 mo.	10.3	19.4	13.8	13.3	0.0
Every 6 mo.	6.9	19.4	27.6	16.7	10.7
Once a year	20.7	16.1	20.7	30.0	28.6
Only once	6.9	6.4	10.3	6.7	14.3
Never	10.3	6.4	6.9	26.7	39.3
N of refugees*	29	31	29	30	28

*Some refugees felt unable to provide estimates for some of the periods.

Note.—Italicized entries indicate the modes.

The refugees who experienced the escape nightmare repeatedly over the years were asked to compare this dream as they experienced it the first few times with how it was experienced more recently. With respect to *intensity*, 70.8% indicated the nightmares were "less intensive than before", 25.0% "the same", and 4.2% "more intensive" than before. With respect to *anxiety*, 68.2% selected the response "less anxiety than before", 27.3% "the same", and 4.5% "more anxiety". When asked to rate how important (or salient) were the *problems with escape* in the dream, 43.8% chose "less important than before", 43.8% "the same", and 12.5% "more important". *Emotional ties* to people in Czechoslovakia as experienced in this repetitive dream recently were described by 56.5% as "less intense than before", by 39.1% as "the same", and by 4.3% as "more intense". This suggests that, compared to their early fore-runners, the more recent versions of the escape nightmare were less intense, associated with less anxiety, were less focussed on problems with escape, and were indicative of weaker emotional ties to persons living in Czechoslovakia.

The main contribution of this analysis is in documenting statistically the decrease in frequency and intensity of escape nightmares over 10 years following actual escape from the Soviet-controlled zone. The lack of (and a need for) similar epidemiological data is well known to professionals who work with refugees, holocaust survivors, or with war veterans.

The limitation of the present study lies both in its retrospective nature (reliance on long-term memories of nightmares) and in the selection of a time span which proved

too brief (unsystematic observations by the author indicate that escape nightmares do occur, in some persons, even 19 yr. after escape or later). The length of follow-up is important: the proportion of the present refugees who recalled having escape nightmares at least once is higher than in my previous study (2). The difference in proportions (84.2% versus only 56.0%) could be related to follow-up length: some persons in the previous study were interviewed too early after their escape (e.g., only one year) and experienced their first escape nightmare only in the years following the interview.

It is also possible that in both studies some refugees denied their experiences with escape nightmares, e.g., to appear "more healthy" or for fear of retaliation by the Czechoslovak police (the police could harass their relatives who still live in Czechoslovakia to discourage refugees from publicly describing how citizens are prevented from freely leaving their country—as is obvious from the nightmare reports). If the combination of similar factors and of the well known tendency to forget dreams is taken into account, it can be estimated that more than 90% of refugees with comparable backgrounds (i.e., with risk of extensive persecution if they returned to their homeland) probably experience escape nightmares at least once within 10 yr. following their escape. Research on other and larger samples of refugees is needed to determine to what extent these findings can be generalized. The symptoms constituted by the escape nightmares could be an important diagnostic or research marker in sociopsychiatric work with refugees.

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Accepted November 13, 1987.