

**A PSYCHOANALYST
ON HIS OWN COUCH**
A Biography of Vamik Volkan
and His Psychoanalytic and
Psychopolitical Concepts

Ferhat Atik



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This book is dedicated to people who experience trauma and who try to address this terrible thing within themselves, perhaps with their inner dynamics and who, hopefully, realize that there really is help out there.

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Foreword

Vamık D. Volkan

Ferhat Atik, the author of this book, had lived through decades-long deadly ethnic conflict on his Mediterranean island, Cyprus. In the mid-2010s, when his environment no longer was dangerous, he came up with an interesting project. He interviewed Cypriot Turks whom he considered public figures, and recorded their predictions about what would happen in the following two and half decades to Turkish Cypriots and their Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus which had not been recognized internationally. Atik would not share the opinions he collected; the interview videos would be locked in a safe place at his university to be opened twenty-five years later.

Like Atik, I was born to Turkish parents at an earlier time on Cyprus when the island was a British colony. I didn't leave the island until I finished high school and went to Turkey for my medical education. As a newly graduated physician I came to the United States with only fifteen dollars in my pocket and my violin, but I had a job as a medical intern. A few years later I became an American citizen. In the United States I studied psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and starting in the early 1960s I had a faculty position at the University of Virginia's School of Medicine, which I kept for thirty-eight years until my retirement.

In the 1970s a man whom I had never met, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, opened a new door for me in international relations and large-group psychology. On November 19, 1977, Sadat visited Israel and at the Knesset

he spoke about a wall—a psychological barrier—between Egypt and Israel. At that time I was a new member of the American Psychiatric Association’s Committee on Psychiatry and Foreign Affairs. The committee assumed the responsibility to study this “wall” by bringing together influential Israelis and Egyptians and, three years later, Palestinians, for six years of unofficial diplomatic dialogues. After the committee’s work ended, I continued my work in the international arena alongside my responsibilities as a teacher and administrator at my medical school.

After my retirement, my wife and I began spending our summer months in our home in North Cyprus. I met Atik for the first time in 2013 when he interviewed me for his project mentioned above. I had just finished writing *Enemies on the Couch: A Psychopolitical Journey Through War and Peace*, in which I documented my decades-long work in many conflict-ridden areas of the world, meeting diplomats, political leaders, scholars, children, refugees, and terrorists, and observing historical events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the tragedy of September 11, 2001 from a psychological angle (Volkan, 2013). Atik took me to a historical location in Famagusta, on the eastern coast of Cyprus, to record my interview.

While we were driving back to my house he wondered what events in my life had led me to spend so much time in places like Israel, Egypt, the Soviet Union, the Baltic republics, the Republic of Georgia, South Ossetia, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Greece, and traumatized societies such as Romania and Albania following the deaths of Nicolae Ceaușescu and Enver Hoxha, respectively, and Kuwait after the invasion by Saddam Hussein’s forces was over. He wanted to know why I wanted to examine why human beings—as large groups—fight, humiliate, and kill one another, and what the obstacles are to a peaceful coexistence. He asked me if my being from Cyprus and the ethnic conflict on the island motivated me for working for a peaceful world. He asked if he could visit and talk with me more deeply about these complex questions. I agreed, and this is how Atik’s book started.

He met with me in the garden of our Cyprus home three or four times a week during the summers of 2013 and 2014. We joked about my being put on a psychoanalytic couch, talking about my life and describing my professional activities. Then an interesting question came up: Why did I choose to carry out clinical research on mourning when I became a faculty member of the University of Virginia’s Medical School? When I began studying the variations of people’s responses to losses, I was not aware that I was

going through a complicated mourning myself as a traumatized immigrant. I became aware of this fact prior to my conversations with Atik. A traumatic loss that occurs in a person's adult life may unconsciously inflame the mental image of a childhood loss. When I began talking with Atik, one of the first stories I told him was about losing my cat Rengin when I was a child.

My understanding about unconscious motivations behind other professional activities emerged for the first time while I was talking with Atik. For example, I was aware that spending seven years studying the life of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, and writing his psychobiography with Princeton University historian Norman Itzkowitz (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1984), had a great deal to do with my re-examining my relationship with my father. While talking with Atik I realized a previously unconscious motivation involved in this activity that took place during my initial years in the United States. During those seven years I was reviewing my image of "Turkishness" that I had left behind by coming to the United States. In a sense, I was mourning. Then I kept this image and held onto it while developing my biculturalism as an immigrant. Getting together with Atik was like being on a psychoanalytic couch!

Atik started to read many of my books. After the summer of 2014, every time I was on the island we would meet frequently and I would answer his questions about psychoanalytic concepts by providing detailed examples. He already had begun writing my biography, but his book slowly evolved to include a comprehensive description of my clinical and psychopolitical findings as well, as a kind of textbook.

I am grateful for Atik's skill and interest in communicating my personal life story, intertwined with clear illustrations of my clinical and psychopolitical concepts. And I am grateful for the time spent on his "couch."

About the author

Ferhat Atik is a Turkish Cypriot writer, scriptwriter, and director. Having lectured on economics, media, literature, and cinema at doctorate level, and having published articles in newspapers and journals, Ferhat Atik then became a producer and TV and radio host. He has published many articles, several novels, and various film scripts.

Silk Road, Autumn, Toy Car, Double Port, When There Is Still Time, Kingdom of Lambousa, and After Tomorrow are among his published works. Ferhat Atik has directed and written screenplays for short films which have appeared in international film festivals, particularly in Italy, India, and the Far East. His full-length feature film *The Key*, based on his own novel *Autumn*, premiered in the 48th International Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival and was then shown at the 31st Istanbul Film Festival in 2012. Ferhat Atik teaches creative writing and screenwriting at Girne American University in Kyrenia and he is the holder of the 2018 Golden Pen of Freedom, an international press freedom award.

About Vamık Volkan

Dr. Vamık Djemal Volkan was born to Turkish parents in Cyprus in 1932. Before coming to the United States in 1957 he received his medical training at the School of Medicine, University of Ankara, Turkey.

He is emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia's School of Medicine in Charlottesville, Virginia. He is also an emeritus training and supervising analyst at the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute in Washington, DC and emeritus senior Erik Erikson Scholar at the Austen Riggs Center, Stockbridge, MA.

Dr. Volkan was one-time medical director of the Blue Ridge Hospital of Virginia University and held the chairmanship of the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction (CSMHI). Dr. Volkan is also among the founders and a former president of the Turkish American Neuropsychiatric Association and the International Society for Political Psychology (ISPP), along with being the former president of the American College of Psychoanalysts. He was an inaugural Yitzhak Rabin Fellow at the Yitzhak Rabin Center in Israel, a visiting professor of law at Harvard University, a visiting professor of political science at the University of Vienna, and a visiting professor of political psychology at Bahçeşehir University in Turkey. He has also served as a visiting professor of psychiatry at Ege University, Ankara University, and Cerrahpaşa University, all in Turkey.

In 1980, with his multidisciplinary team, Vamik launched an initiative to bring together representatives of large groups in conflict for a series of unofficial diplomatic dialogues in order to seek common ground and peaceful coexistence. Speaking with many world leaders and working in refugee camps and visiting Israel, Egypt, the Soviet Union and later Russia, the Baltic Republics, Croatia, Albania, Romania, Kuwait, Georgia, South Ossetia, Turkey, and Greece, over more than three decades, he developed new theories on large-group psychology and suggested new strategies for peaceful coexistence.

Vamik Volkan has been a member of the International Negotiation Network (INN), an organization chaired by former US president Jimmy Carter throughout the 1980s and 1990s. He was a temporary consultant at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Albania and Macedonia. He held the title of Fulbright/Sigmund Freud Foundation Visiting Scholar of Psychoanalysis in Vienna, Austria in 2006. Dr. Volkan has published nearly fifty books and he has contributed to many publications of others as coauthor, editor, and coeditor, and he has penned hundreds of articles. He has been nominated for many awards by numerous organizations around the world and has sat on the executive boards of sixteen journals. Vamik Volkan was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize five times in the mid-2000s and in 2014, with letters of support coming in from twenty-seven countries.

In 2008, Dr. Volkan founded the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI), becoming its first president. The IDI consists of unofficial representatives from Germany, Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the West Bank. They meet twice a year to examine world affairs, primarily from a psychopolitical point of view.

About this book

Vamik Volkan, to use his own expression, “puts himself on his own couch,” and tells his life story as a psychoanalyst who has seen and studied humans in many parts of the world. Within this book are many concepts Dr. Volkan has introduced into the world that have gained wide acceptance and which have been highly influential.

Because a book about Vamik Volkan is destined not to be a mere biography but also a professional guide, the life of a professor and his real-life stories, a means towards understanding humanity, societies, memories, and modes of psychological treatment, the issue of writing methodology inevitably arises. For this reason, starting in 2013, I interviewed him for hours, sometimes for days and months. In parallel with the interviews, I read the forty-two books that Dr. Volkan had written down the years and I scrutinized them very closely. When I felt I had sufficiently mastered the overall meaning and the minutiae of Dr. Volkan’s works, the interviews were transcribed and they became the backbone of the present book.

The words in this biography are, of course, largely mine—it is no autobiography. Yet, I quote extensively from Vamik Volkan’s works and utterances. Let it be noted that, at certain points in the book, some of the names, places, and times have been altered in the interests of doctor–patient confidentiality. The scientific terminology employed here has been rigorously checked with Dr. Volkan.

Starting to write a new book is as exciting for me as starting a new life, yet with all the experiences of the past embodied in the work. And this publication is, perhaps, the most absorbing and fulfilling of my writing career to date. One pleasant reflection is that I got the idea of writing Vamık Volkan's biography when driving from Famagusta (a city on the eastern coast of Cyprus), down the breathtaking mountain range that crisscrosses the North, to the delightful town of Kyrenia on the northern littoral. This is where Vamık Volkan has his Cyprus residence and where he spends his summer months.

Starting off was largely a matter of having long conversations with Vamık Volkan, enjoying his hospitality, his courtesy, and his perspectives as a compassionate citizen of the world. Emotional it certainly was and the sense of suffering humanity was always there. As was fun and as was anger; as was grief. I sat attending not just to his words, but also to his tone of voice, his body language, and his rather subtle way of interacting.

Writing a biography has a great deal to do with empathy. As Atticus says in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1961), in order to understand somebody and their concerns, one has to climb into their skin and walk around in it for a while. I believe I have managed to do something like this with Vamık Volkan, due in no small part to the fact that my understanding has arisen largely through Dr. Volkan's firsthand accounts. Hopefully, this will mean a certain sense of immediacy for you, the reader.