

THE ALPINIST'S DREAMS DURING MOUNTAIN EXPEDITION  
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Alpinism is a special sports discipline which goes beyond the traditional way of understanding sport. This is determined by two factors: the mountains in which it is performed and the personalities of the climbers. This select sports discipline attracts people who look for unusual and thrilling emotions in the immediate contact with nature. The main reason for doing this sport is the opportunity of experiencing certain emotional states, among others fear and the thrill of approaching the brink of death. Thus - the common conviction that this sport is for the strong, the brave, for people who like risk and danger.

The research into the personalities of alpine climbers in different countries, here also in Poland, shows however that the climber is often a person of psychasthenic, neurotic and even schizoid personality. Quite often the motivation for mountain climbing is a compensatory mechanism of feeling of inferiority or lesser physical fitness and so on. It seems that the age of typical romanticism and of the dominance of esthetic values in alpinism has gone so it is surprising that this dangerous and risky sport which every year results in many fatal casualties, should still attract so many intelligent and creative people.

Expeditions to the highest mountains always evoke much public interest. In this environment man's organism is exposed to a series of traumatic factors and it is forced to live in sometimes extremely primitive and harmful conditions.

Low temperature and the continuous hypoxia evoke not only the symptoms of mountain sickness but sometimes cause a permanent harm to the central nervous system. On the basis of the research carried by the author during Polish expeditions to Caucasus, Hindukush, and the Andes these changes are described as so called high-altitude brain asthenia which consists in intellectual handicap, and permanent changes in emotional and sexual sphere. Descriptions of these cases are disturbing.

Despite the fact that mountain medicine became an independent discipline, and that there appeared different scientific societies of this branch of medicine we know very little about disturbances in sleep and particularly in dreams of the climbers during mountain expeditions. The latter was one of the subjects of the author's observations during the Polish 14 month long expedition to the Andes in South America in 1973/74. The members of the expedition were 10 climbers of the age varying from 28 to 46. All of them had university education, mostly technical, steady jobs and they all came from a big town. They had practised this sport for many years and most of them had already taken part in high mountain expeditions.

The expedition because of its length, the variety of climatical and

and geographical conditions, the isolation and the necessity of surviving about 50 day long hurricane in Patagonia was one of the most difficult ones. During the expedition there were several critical situations resulting from conflicts between the members of the group and as a result only 5 climbers stayed till the end of the expedition. The most difficult stage of the expedition was connected with reaching Fitz Roy, the highest peak in the Patagonian Andes. It was then that the climbers were exposed to danger most, both because of difficult climb and the hurricane. Also then individual and group nostalgia was at its culminating point. Feelings like imminence, isolation from family, sensitivity, irritability and impulsiveness dominated in the sphere of psychical experiences. All the members of the group painfully felt the impossibility of providing for their sexual needs and compensated it by masturbation and sometimes homosexual behaviour and "games". Unquenched needs in this sphere found also their expression in the contents of letters written to families and closest friends, and most of all in dreams.

## DREAMS IN THE MOUNTAINS

During the expedition over 100 dreams were recorded. At the request of the expedition doctor the climbers told their dreams at breakfast or immediately they woke up.

The frequency of dreams occurring was directly proportional to the altitude at which the climbers actually were. The dreams occurred also more frequently at times of remarkable emotional tenseness of the whole group, particularly before climbing and attacking the peak. They occurred usually early in the morning e.g. during a short sleep in a tent after a sleepless night. Most often they occurred during short naps in the sleepless night at high altitudes when the lack of oxygen made breathing difficult.

About 70 % of recorded dreams had a similar subject matter which was directly or indirectly connected with the sexual sphere. Anxiety and catastrophic dreams were next in frequency of occurring.

The latter became more frequent in periods anticipating attacks on Fitz Roy. It was easy to see in the dreams the counterparts of the tension felt in reality and of the anxiety about the forthcoming difficulties and danger.

Here is a choice of such dreams.

Dream 9\*) - a short dream, probably early in the morning: "I am in a hurry, I am nervously building a tomb for myself because I am convinced I will need it soon."

Dream 11 - this climber had never dreamt before or he had never remembered his dreams. This time, the night before the climb to the top he dreamt that he was travelling somewhere far away and that he had not said goodbye to his father. In his dream for a short time he sees the figure of his father who has grown so much older that he has grown a long grey beard.

Interpreting this dream it is worth mentioning that a week later after an accident in which one of the climbers was injured, the climber had a

\*) the dreams were numbered as they were recorded in the doctor's diary

violent row with the leader of the expedition as a result of which the climber left the expedition and went back all alone through the wastes of Patagonia to Poland. He went on foot, occasionally taking a lift. This irrational behaviour can be treated as fulfilment of his subconscious need to return to his father and to seek safety at his side. He expressed his aggression towards the leader of the expedition by making him responsible for his risky and dangerous leave.

Dream 15 - "Dressed in a soldiers uniform I am walking through the field on which shooting is going on. The enemy soldiers are shooting in my direction. In panic I run away and jump in the weed covered pool. The bullets drop near me but they don't hit me. I swim along a dark canal that leads to a river. I can see everything very clearly: earth is surging and I get entangled in weeds which paralyse all my movements. I feel terribly endangered. I wake up frightened and although I know I am in a tent I can still see my dream. I open my eyes, it is completely dark, the image slowly disappears. My eyelids are fluttering and I am all in sweat. Only after I had sat up and breathed in deeply the bad dream vanished".

Sexual dreams most often expressed unfulfilled needs of the climbers. In some dreams sexual desires were satisfied in a simple and unceremonious way, in others they got complicated and their fulfilment appeared impossible.

Dream 61 - "I am going for a long expedition and I know it will be long before I am back. I meet my friend's wife whom I have always fancied. In a straightforward way she suggests "saying good-bye" to each other and she gives herself to me "so that I could manage without women for that long". I wake up with ejaculations".

Dream 70 - a tiring night in a tent at the altitude of 4400 m: "in a street in Paris I catch a hand a beautiful Hindu girl. At first she resisted but after a while she held me round my waist and I felt her put her hand in the back pocket of my trousers and squeeze me tightly near my buttocks. We descend to the garden and we start a sophisticated foreplay and next the intercourse in position "69". Immediately I woke up there was a slow ejaculation but without orgasm".

Dream 74 - "Forty beautiful girls in the Embassy of Buenos Aires, all are at my disposal and all woo me. I roll over from one to another, I wallow on them and touching each I get another orgasm and another ejaculation".

Dream 75 - "My friend and I are invited to an exotic flight. Two beautiful blonds invite us to a travel agency. The lights slowly fade and the room is filled with orange light. The girls enter in completely transparent gowns. On their firm breasts there are chocolate flowers. We lick them up in the initial caresses."

Towards the end of the expedition at the stage of growing homesickness and missing the family there occurred dreams connected with this subject.

Dream 58 - "I am coming home from an expedition. I find my house completely empty, white empty walls. I learn that my wife has divorced me and at present she is in hospital giving birth to a child by another man. My mother consoles me and tries to cheer me up. I am filled with joy and I am glad I won't have to marry again".

Dream 18 - "I am dreaming I have a four year old son (in reality I am a bachelor and have no children). My son is a wise and resolute child, we go for walks and I buy him ice creams. My son and I and some woman are speeding along in a car. Because we drove too fast we find ourselves up in the air and we fall into the sea. I keep up the car and push it towards the shore, and then I save my son and the girl. Nothing has happened not even to the car, we can drive again".

It is worth mentioning that this dream soon came true. The climber who dreamt it met a Polish woman with a four year old son. She had just divorced her Peruvian husband and was coming back to Poland. They got married and make a happy couple.

#### FINAL REMARKS

The dreams of the climbers described here, besides their picturesqueness and vividness throw some light on the subject of sexual sphere in persons doomed for longlasting isolation from the rest of community and destined to stay in a small homogenous group. Directly or through different symbols dreams show subjective and subconscious desires and needs of the climbers. Firstly these are sexual needs. Through dreams the needs not only came into the open but also in many cases they found fulfilment and the dreams relieved tension.

On the second plane there are anxiety and catastrophic dreams and those connected with home and family. These expressed most often the imminence experienced in reality and resulting from the dangers during the expedition and the feelings of homesickness, missing family and closest friends which were felt at certain stages of the expedition.

Both kinds of dreams were very realistic and they were accompanied by psychosomatic and physiological reactions. To generalize we can say that through their subject matter and intensity these dreams in a compensating way fulfilled these important needs that could not be satisfied during the expedition in a normal way. This refers mainly to sexual and emotional spheres. Sleep at high altitudes, usually disturbed and shortened, is more often than in normal conditions filled with intense dreaming.

One can interpret dreams described here in a variety of ways. One can relate them to real events in the life of the expedition, one can treat them as the anticipation of the events to come, but they can also be considered as compensating forms of satisfying sexual drive. Homogeneity, the power and vividness of these dreams and also physiological reactions that accompanied them speak for the level of unfulfilment of these needs during a mountain expedition.

The phenomenon described here can be seen as one of the psychological and physiological defence mechanisms in an extreme situation such as a long mountain expedition. This mechanism facilitates holding the psychosomatic balance of the organism distorted by external stress factors and the impossibility of satisfying basic needs.