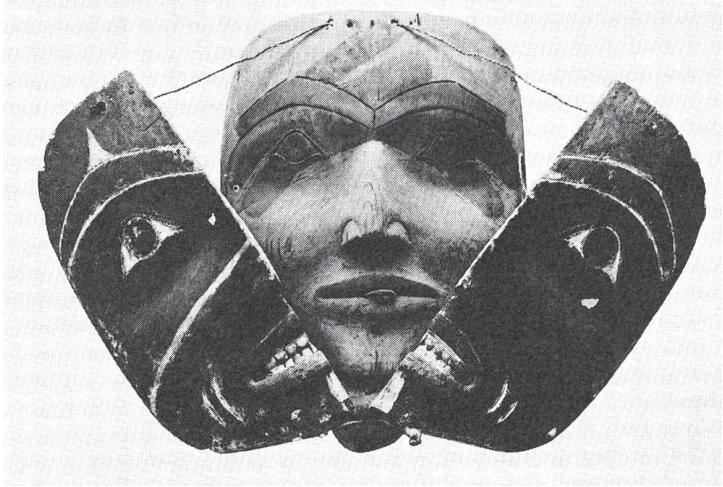


GÜNDÜZ Y. H. VASSAF
Prisoners of Ourselves



Double dance mask of the Haida.
Queen Charlotte Islands, Canada.

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GÜNDÜZ Y. H. VASSAF

Prisoners of Ourselves

Totalitarianism in Everyday Life



GÜNDÜZ Y. H. VASSAF, writer and psychologist, was educated in United States and Turkey. Having first worked as a clinical psychologist, he taught at Boğaziçi University, but resigned from teaching after the Turkish military coup of 1980 in protest against the law abrogating academic autonomy and freedom. Before turning to writing, he was a Research Fellow at the Institute of Higher Studies in Vienna, and subsequently Guest Professor in Germany at the Universities of Kassel, Marburg and Bremen. He has been on the Board of Directors of the International Council of Psychologists, was Regional Coordinator for Europe and the Middle East for the American Psychological Association Division of Community Psychology, a founding member of the Committee for Peace of the International Union of Psychological Science, and the founding member and head of the Istanbul group of Amnesty International.

Vassaf's books, published in Turkish and translated into several languages, focus on the psychology of everyday life, with an overarching theme of the quest for individual freedom. His essays combine daily life with poetry, politics, anecdotes and jokes, sometimes provocative, always questioning issues such as personal and community identity; his collections of short stories take a penetrating, satirical look at the modern world, combining social comment with a sense of the absurd. A recurrent theme has been transitions between countries and cultures over time. Recently he has offered a radical re-evaluation of the nature and role of history in an age of electronic media, censorship and the manipulation of information. A leading figure in Turkish intellectual life, Vassaf has also had a weekly cultural column in the newspaper *Radikal* since 1997. In 2010-2011 he co-hosted a TV talk show covering a wide spectrum of intellectual debates. A biography of his life and work, based on a series of interviews with him was published in 2011.

Books by Gündüz Vassaf: *Daha Sesimizi Duyuramadık* (We Have Yet To Be Heard: Turkish Workers' Children in Europe), 1983, 2nd ed: 2003; *Cehennem Övgü* (Prisoners of Ourselves-Totalitarianism in Everyday Life), 1992; *Cennetin Dibi* (Depths of Heaven), 1996; *Annem Belkıs* (My Mother Belkıs), 2000; *40 Yıl Önce 40 Yıl Sonra-Amerika Rusya* (40 Years On: America and Russia), 2006; *Tarihi Yargılıyorum* (Judging History Judging Us), 2007; *Türkiye Sen Kimsin?* (Turkey Who Are You?), 2008; *Kimliğimi Kaybettim Hükümsüzdür* (I Have No Flag, No Religion, No Sex), 2010; *Boğazın Ötesi* (Tales Beyond the Bosphorus), forthcoming.

ABOUT MYSELF

I was little. One day adults would not believe in something I experienced and I realized that my mother could be wrong. I couldn't hold myself back. I had a laughing fit.

At nine, I became afraid of others. While my mother and I were secretly watching from a hole in the shutters, a group of fifty to sixty people were on the verge of attacking our house. Earlier in the day our teacher had taught us a nationalist slogan which I had written in chalk on our car in the front garden. They noticed it. The pogrom in the city continued throughout the night.

When a few months after going to boarding school I received news that my cat (Tarzan) had died, I knew that one could die from loneliness and lack of love.

The head of the psychology department said that the language in my thesis had to be "purified." I did not object. This was my initiation into self-censorship. I now have a thesis that I can't understand.

I was working as an intern in the psychiatry clinic of the university hospital when a mother turned in her son with the hash she had found in his pockets. When the head of the unit, our professor, passed the hash around at a party in his home that night, I had become a colleague.

Just after the military coup, in order to stay at the university and comply with the junta, some academics shaved their beards. Some censored their past. Those who would not, resigned. I was one of them. I miss the students.

Once, I used influence so that our son could become a citizen. The consulate had refused, saying I was not married. A bastard cannot be given citizenship they said. Then in the same breath they objected to my family name, saying that it was against the law because it was of foreign origin. "How did you get such a name?" the consul demanded. I pointed to the giant portrait of the country's founding president. "He's a relative of my father. Must have been his doing," I said. Our son became a citizen.

Some years ago, after giving it much thought, I came to the conclusion that being a fireman was the least harmful of all professions. "Not so," a friend said, "In France firefighters secretly set fires to become heroes."

In recent years I have kept mostly to myself. From time to time, I cannot stop myself from writing. Had they asked me what should be done with the prison that just shut down, I would have said, make a museum with only mirrors inside.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	13
I. In Praise of Night	15
II. Freedom in Hell	25
III. Prisoners of Speech	33
IV. No Longer Free: Madness in Modern Times	45
V. Here We Eat, There We Sleep	65
VI. Heroes Are Totalitarian	75
VII. Informania	87
VIII. What's Your Sex?	95
IX. Freedom from Choice	109

- X. In Defense of Traitors 137
- XI. Death Forgetting 147
- XII. Beware of the Artist! 157
- XIII. Disagreement Forever 167
- XIV. Goals Against Life 175
- XV. Zap! You're Dead 189
- XVI. Homo Sapiens Blues 205
- XVII. Why Children? 229
- XVIII. This Magic Moment 239
- XIX. The Totalitarianism of Love (As Practiced) 251
- XX. To Be Drunk! 269

*In memory of Giardano Bruno (1548-1600)
who rejected the Pope's heaven.*

To alıkuşu 11 and its residents

*The absurd thing is that some philosopher has
already said something even absurder before.*

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 B.C. - 43 B.C.)

*What really needs to be explained is not why
the hungry steal or the exploited go on strike,
but why most of the hungry don't steal and the
exploited don't go on strike.*

Wilhelm Reich

INTRODUCTION

This book is about freedom.

It's about freedom we avoid. About freedom that we fear to have in our everyday lives. Even with our simple daily acts we subject ourselves to a totalitarian order of our creation and subservience.

My first idea was to write a book about our accommodation of totalitarian regimes. Throughout history, millions across the world have experienced changes in regimes from a relatively democratic state to a totalitarian order.

In the end and over time, we acquiesce to these regimes. We internalize the new norms. The very few who don't, become martyrs, unknown patients in mental hospitals, forgotten prisoners of conscience.

I did not write a book about the above because I realized that also in "democratic" regimes we can become prisoners of ourselves.

The essays are observations about how we imprison ourselves in our daily lives.

None offer solutions as such.

Solutions can only lead to other forms of totalitarianism.

Critical thinking and doubt, on the other hand, promote freedom.

Like all others, our species will also become extinct.

Whether we go as prisoners or in freedom is up to us.

Marburg, 1988