



# GIVING BIRTH TO A BABY DOLPHIN

PHOTO: CHANNEL FOUR

## ESOTERIC REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN-DOLPHIN CONNECTIONS IN THE LATE SOVIET WATERBIRTH MOVEMENT

by **Anna Ozhiganova**

### abstract

This article describes the New Age version of the *dolphinist* myth and the practices of human-dolphin communication that developed in the late Soviet Union in the grassroots movement for “home waterbirth and active raising of infants.” The *Aquaculture method*, authored by the psychic healer and charismatic teacher Igor Charkovsky (1936–2021), included intensive training of pregnant women, giving birth in water, infant swimming, and diving from the first day of life, as well as metaphysical connections with dolphins. Charkovsky drew inspiration from such prominent representatives of the Western New Age dolphinist community as John Lilly (1915–2001), Jacques Mayol (1927–2001) and others with whom he was personally acquainted. However, the *Aquaculture* project was also closely related to the tradition of an early Soviet utopia with its notion of man’s omnipotence and power over nature.

**KEY WORDS:** New Age, human-dolphin connections, dolphin consciousness, water babies, paranormal abilities, late Soviet waterbirth movement, *Aquaculture method*.

The dolphin has become an essential icon of the New Age movement, acting as a benefactor of humans, embodiment of primordial wisdom and “channel of communication” with nature. The abundance of images and myths associated with cetaceans, but mostly with dolphins, allowed some researchers to talk about the “New Age dolphinist sub-culture.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, it would be correct to define New Age not as a subculture or counterculture but as a complementary culture that consistently generates hybrids, or as a “diffused religion which is in constant transgression.”<sup>22</sup> Some authors have noted that no structure or boundary can be drawn between New Age and such phenomena as the ecological movement, science fiction and academic science,<sup>3</sup> and this confusion is seen also in the studies of human-dolphin connections.

Although many myths and legends about human-dolphin communication and miraculous rescues of people by friendly dolphins have been known from the pre-modern era, particu-

larly from ancient Greece, the modern dolphin myth originated in the 1960s. It was closely related to the desire to rethink and rebuild the human-nature relationship in the era of the rapid development of science, technology, and space exploration. As Arne Kalland noted in Bron R. Taylor's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, two main concepts are brought together to form the New Age dolphin myth: "One is inspired by pre-modern myths and legends about dolphin-human relations. The other is inspired by high tech, modern science, and space travels."<sup>4</sup>

On the one side, dolphins become a symbol of a peaceful and harmonious relationship between human beings and nature and patrons of such practices as natural healing, childbirth, parenting, meditative states of consciousness, nature sustainability, etc. On the other side, dolphins are attributed with a huge brain, highly developed language and intelligence, the ability to transmit images directly to the human brain and stimulate them to the scientific research of human potential and the creation of high-tech communication technologies. As Kalland wrote, the image of a pre-tech dolphin in the New Age cult merged with an image of a high-tech dolphin that is believed to communicate with humans, have contacts with galactic forces and scan each other's diagnostics and treatment using sonar.<sup>5</sup>

**A KEY FIGURE** in both scientific and mystical approaches to dolphins was American neurophysiologist John Lilly, author of the popular scientific volumes *Man and Dolphin: Adventures of a New Scientific Frontier* (1961) and *The Mind of the Dolphin: A Nonhuman Intelligence* (1967). Lilly was a member of a counterculture circle of scientists that also included Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) and Timothy Leary. Lilly embarked on formal dolphin research in 1959 and later combined this work with efforts to establish communication with dolphins. His studies on the dolphin brain convinced him that dolphins were highly intelligent and advanced spiritual beings with their own language, knowledge, and ethics. John Lilly's works inspired many scientists as well as all kinds of esotericists to pursue dolphin studies that were focused on their physiology, social life, intelligence, and communication. As American scholar of religion, J. Gordon Melton summarized: "New Agers have taken to heart Lilly's contention that dolphins are superior beings with a metaphysical message."<sup>6</sup>

Another iconic figure in the studies of human-dolphin connections was Jacques Mayol – a famous French free diver and hero of *The Big Blue* film by Luc Besson (1988). He authored the book *Homo Delphinus: The Dolphin Within Man* (1979) based on his experience of telepathic communication with dolphins and the practice of apnea, to which he attributed not only physiological but also mystical meanings. In his experiments, Mayol explored the aquatic ape hypothesis of human origins<sup>7</sup> and concluded that humans could return to a particular primordial state and become

a *homo delphinus* through special training and some anatomy and physiology transformations – a kind of genetic make-up.

Estelle Myers was a founder of the Rainbow Dolphin Centre in New Zealand – "a research center to study the magic of the human dolphin connection" (1981).<sup>8</sup> In her PhD dissertation written in the unusual genre of "reflective topical autobiography", Myers wrote that there was a small international group of people involved in cetacean research including Lilly, Mayol, Dr. Horace Dobbs (founder of International Dolphin Watch, a non-profit organization for the observation, conservation, study and protection of wild dolphins), researcher and musician Jim Nollman, who studied communication with dolphins using sounds and music, and some others: "They all shared a common thread; their lives had been changed, as indeed mine had, by their en-

counters with dolphins."<sup>9</sup> Myers invented the concept of *dolphinicity*, meaning the "warm feeling of happiness and love for all overcomes humans" and a "magical serendipity connection to cetacea." She noted that there was common usage amongst the circle members to sign letters with the words "With dolphinicity."<sup>10</sup>

The Danish historian of religion, Mikael Rothstein, noted that the rise of human-dolphin identities

in New Age speculations is a fairly recent construct.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Melton and his co-writers<sup>12</sup> make no mention of humans who believe themselves to be dolphins in their summary of the symbolic meanings of cetaceans in New Age thoughts. However, the notion of being a dolphin seems a logical continuation of the idea of the magical connection between humans and dolphins within the New Age dolphinist myth. Dolphins acquired the "character of the messiah" and they served as an "instrument or a medium for a divine or cosmic mind to have been sent on a mission to save the Earth."<sup>13</sup> So, the merging of humans and dolphins is directly related to millenarian New Age views: "New Age people become dolphins due to their engagement in what they believe to be a cosmic transformation – the advent of the Age of Aquarius or the dawn of a new era."<sup>14</sup> Thus, becoming a human dolphin is one of the options for human enhancement, a way to "become different." Still, the whole process is ignited by a structural need for transformation on a societal or cosmic level.

### Igor Charkovsky and his *Aquaculture Method*

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a broad grassroots movement for a healthy lifestyle was formed in the Soviet Union. In part, it was a response to the ideological appeal to people to take responsibility for their health: "With all the considerable successes of our medicine, it would be naive to believe that it alone could solve the problems of public health. No, each of us can and should provide himself a sufficiently high level of health, if possible, without waiting for doctors and using medications. Himself,

**“DOLPHINS COULD PROVIDE THE NECESSARY ASSISTANCE IN HUMAN ADAPTION TO WATER AND THUS CONTRIBUTE TO THE EVOLUTION OF HUMANS AS AQUATIC MAMMALS.”**



Igor Charkovsky was a research fellow at the All Union Research Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow, an institution focused on the research of physical exercise. Here he's pictured left with child-physiologist Professor Ilya Arshavsky (1979).

PHOTO:RIANOVOSTI

because a person has no right to charge society and relatives with taking care of himself.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, ordinary people tended to regard the state with utter distrust. They shared a sensibility that “healing required concerted efforts to cultivate personal strengths, morals, and interpersonal relations.”<sup>16</sup> Hundreds of people in large cities formed clubs for a healthy lifestyle. They studied naturopathy<sup>17</sup> and participated in wellness activities such as jogging, yoga, breathing exercises and so-called cold strengthening via swimming in ice holes. The most enthusiastic members began to practice alternative approaches to pregnancy, childbirth and infant raising. Thus, people “took responsibility” for themselves, but in completely different ways than expected by physicians and health officials. They promoted a holistic approach to health, psychic healing, and other esoteric practices, focusing on women’s and infants’ health, which was unusual for the late Soviet culture. The most famous among these parent groups was a Moscow club called *Zdorovaia sem’ia* [Health Family], where meetings were held in the 1980s with important figures of the international New Age movement such as Linda Tellington-Jones,<sup>18</sup> Estelle Myers, John Lilly, and others.

In this milieu, a special training system for babies called *Aquaculture*, authored by the psychic healer and charismatic teacher, Igor Charkovsky, was widely implemented. The *Aquaculture* method included intensive training of pregnant women (swimming, diving, gymnastics, and cold strengthening); giving

birth in water (ideally in the sea); *baby yoga* (a kind of manual neonatal therapy); infant swimming and diving from the first day of life; *dynamic gymnastics* with infants (a set of exercises that consisted of twisting, rotating and throwing) and metaphysical connections with dolphins.

**ACCORDING TO CHARKOVSKY**, dolphins could provide the necessary assistance in human adaptation to water and thus contribute to the evolution of humans as aquatic mammals. He claimed that his theory “is that the dolphin environment offers the best imaginable conditions for infant raising and thereby for the development of the whole human race.”<sup>19</sup> Children trained in the *Aquaculture* method were called *water babies*, *Charkovsky’s children* or *babies-dolphins*. They have been attributed with various paranormal abilities such as clairvoyance, telepathy and psychic healing. (“You need to understand that this is not just done for the sake of physical education but also to reveal the inner vision, the ‘third eye,’ those abilities that are now called ‘paranormal’.”)<sup>20</sup>

Many of those who were involved in aquatic training did not share a belief in the metaphysical connection of their children with dolphins and perceived the expression “babies-dolphins” as a metaphor. Charkovsky’s follower and former aqua coach Margarita Razenkova explains her critical position: “I have never set the goal of developing superpowers. God forbids! But some went to Charkovsky just for this. And they held the children



PHOTO: SOVIET VISUALS

Members of the Healty Family Club in Gorkyj Park, Moscow, 1985. Club members took part in activities such as jogging, yoga, breathing exercises, and cold strengthening via swimming in ice-holes.

underwater so that they turned blue! [...] I even wrote about this: With such activities, not all children will live to the Age of Aquarius, you'll just drown them, that's all [...] I can't say anything about their meditative states, I can't tell whether the baby was meditating or just fell asleep. Someone says: "Oh, look, he is meditating! Dolphins! Stars!" Well, why not? But not me."<sup>21</sup>

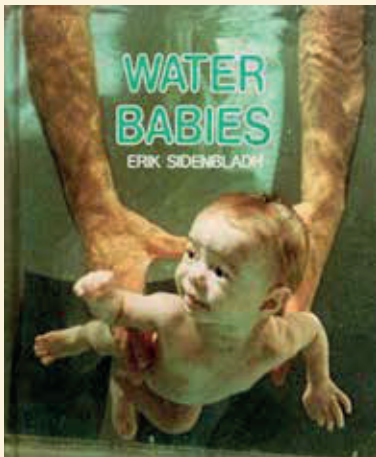
Margarita Razenkova trained her son Vasia very intensively, according to the *Aquaculture method*. At the age of one year and nine months, he became a star in the public demonstration of the abilities of water babies, organized by Charkovsky's supporters in 1992. He swam (in reality, floated with his hands tied) 33 kilometers in a school swimming pool for 15 hours non-stop, following Charkovsky, who walked in the water in front of his small disciple. Charkovsky argued that Vasia "could swim across the ocean,"<sup>22</sup> although some of his followers had another opinion regarding this event. Vladimir Bagriansky, father of the first child born in the sea in 1986,<sup>23</sup> describes Vasia's marathon swim as one of many of Charkovsky's hoaxes. Another Charkovsky's follower, psychic Evgeniia Igoshina, admits that she perceived Vasia as a dolphin baby at the time: "He was a real dolphin, not a human. I had a feeling that he was not breathing at all because he raised his

head for only a second. He even made sounds like a dolphin."<sup>24</sup>

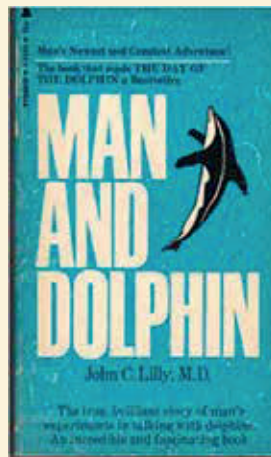
The *Aquaculture* advocates formed the basis of the Russian homebirth movement. Although homebirth was illegal in the Soviet Union and remains so in Russia of today,<sup>25</sup> homebirth midwives significantly impacted the reform and humanization of Russian obstetric care. Thus, home waterbirth developed significantly. At the same time, other components of the *Aquaculture* method – water training, dynamic gymnastics, and cold strengthening – became quickly marginalized and are currently practiced only among a narrow circle of radical supporters of the *Aquaculture* way of infant raising. Accordingly, *Aquaculture* researchers focused mainly on homebirth practice, while other aspects, particularly the human-dolphin connection, remained largely unstudied. In her dissertation on the "Russian waterbirth method," anthropologist Ekaterina Belousova mentions the main elements of Charkovsky's dolphin myth: Dolphins could help humans get rid of their fear of water; pregnant and birthing women should meditate to help their children establish contact with dolphins. She summarizes that the dolphins gained a unique, authoritative status among "natural childbirth" activists as they became "significant others" or "companion species" in the terms by Donna Haraway.<sup>26</sup>

**IN THIS ARTICLE,** I consider Igor Charkovsky's ideas about the metaphysical connections between babies and dolphins to be embodied in various aquatic and spiritual practices in the context of the interest in "dolphin consciousness," which appeared in the 1960s in the West, and later – in the 1970s and 1980s – in the Soviet Union. What were the sources of inspiration for Charkovsky that contributed to the emergence of these ideas and practices? What did alternatively-minded parents feel about the practice of raising "babies-dolphins"? What was the specificity of the late Soviet "dolphinist myth" and how did it differ from human-dolphin communication research in the West? Was the late Soviet movement for home waterbirth and active raising of infants part of the international New Age, or was it closely related to the tradition of an early Soviet utopia?

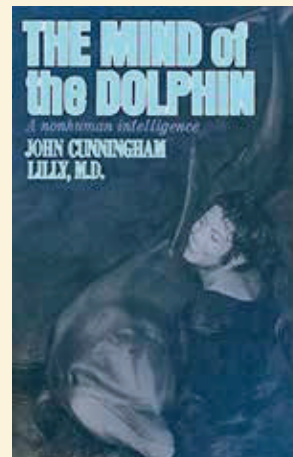
The study of this phenomenon is complicated by the fact that Charkovsky conveyed his ideas only in personal conversations and in practice: There is no detailed presentation of his method. Moreover, there is a high degree of mystification and deception in his experiments that his followers only partially reveal. Thus, this article is written based on a wide range of sources: publications in the Soviet press, television programs, photos and videos dedicated to infant swimming, diving and cold strengthening, as well as *Samizdat* materials, in particular, the *AQUA* journal, published by Charkovsky's followers, Tatiana and Alexey Sargunas. In addition, Western publications that discuss Charkovsky's ideas and experiments are also an important source: A book called *Water Babies* by Swedish journalist Erik Sidenbladh (1982), based on his conversations with Charkovsky in the early 1980s, and a reflective topical autobiography by Estelle Myers, *Midwife to Gaia, birthing global consciousness* (2008), in which one chapter is devoted to her trip to the Soviet Union in 1985 and her meeting with Charkovsky. The stories of my interlocutors –



Erik Sidenbladh's book *Water babies* was first published in Swedish in 1982, and soon translated to English.



The American neurophysiologist John Lilly's books *Man and Dolphin* and *The Mind of the Dolphin* served as a source of inspiration for Igor Charkovsky.



Vladimir Bagriansky with his daughter Eya, who was born in the Black Sea in Crimea in 1986.

participants of the late Soviet movement for home waterbirth: Vladimir Bagriansky, Evgeniia Igoshina, Tamara Solovieva, Tatiana Sargunas, Marina Dadasheva, Natalia Kotlar and others – are also an extremely important source for this study.

## Creating a Baby Dolphin myth in the late Soviet Union

Nobody knows when and how Charkovsky came up with the idea of a special relationship between humans and dolphins. In a conversation with Estelle Myers, Charkovsky said that he had his first contact with dolphins back in 1958.<sup>27</sup> His followers believe that Charkovsky possessed strong psychic abilities: He was engaged in extrasensory healing, could “see the biofield” and had a particular “channel” for communication with dolphins. Some people believed that he had been a dolphin in a previous incarnation. Others claimed that he was half-dolphin due to his ability “to be out of this world.”<sup>28</sup> Those closely acquainted with Charkovsky noted that it was difficult for him to express his thoughts in writing, and his speech was “very peculiar and tangled.”<sup>29</sup>

There was a legend about the miraculous rescue of Charkovsky by dolphins in the Black Sea when he served at the Sevastopol Naval Academy in his youth. A version of this story was told by French journalist Patrice Van Eersel, who took part in Charkovsky's 1987 “aquatic expedition” to the Crimea: “He swam for so long that he no longer remembered how and when he lost consciousness; it took two days or more. Then, finally, he came to his senses and was amazed to see that he was lying on the same beach from where he had started swimming. Then he remembered the dream he had just had, that he was being quickly carried by two dolphins. But was it a dream?”<sup>30</sup>

**“HE CONCLUDED THAT IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE A NEWBORN CHILD WOULD BE ABLE TO LIVE IN THE OCEAN WITH A POD OF DOLPHINS AND FEED ON DOLPHIN MILK.”**

Erik Sidenbladh wrote that Charkovsky had been dreaming about an experiment with babies and dolphins since the 1960s. However, his dreams about people who follow dolphins to live in the ocean were first publicly announced in 1979. An article in the journal *Technology for Youth* states that Charkovsky conducted a successful experiment on children-dolphin contact: Babies swam, dived and even slept in the water near the dolphins. As a result of this experiment, he concluded that in the very near future a newborn child would be able to live in the ocean with a pod of dolphins and feed on dolphin milk. First, however, the question arose of how a small child would hold on to a dolphin's back: “Maybe instinct will make our newborn hold on tightly to the dolphin, and the oncoming water-air flow will turn on thousands of “micro reflectors” on the baby's sensitive body,

so that it will automatically take the most optimal pose with the lowest possible resistance to the aquatic environment.”<sup>31</sup> These ideas sound like quotes from a science fiction novel, but archive photos have documented these experiments.

Sydenbladh also cites Charkovsky's report on these experiments: “During the summer of 1979, we (that is, I, several researchers from the Institute, female athletes, mothers, women in advanced stages of pregnancy and an assorted group of children between the ages of eight days and eight years) made an expedition to a dolphin research station on the Black Sea. We conducted various experiments with the dolphins, some of which we were forced to do at night while the station's regular research staff were sleeping. They did not approve of having our newborns together with dolphins because they were afraid that the dolphins might harm the children”<sup>32</sup>. The members of the expedition experimented with different ways

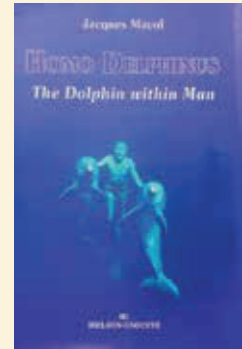
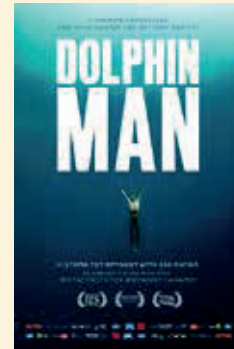


PHOTO: ANEMON PRODUCTIONS

Famous French free diver Jacques Mayol was an iconic figure in the studies of human-dolphin connections. His book *Homo Delphinus: the Dolphin Within Man* (1979) was based on the experience of telepathic communication with dolphins and practice of apnea.

of attaching the babies to the dolphins' backs: "We attached different types of saddles and handles to their bodies and they willingly allowed the children to ride on them."<sup>33</sup>

At the time, all dolphinariums in the Soviet Union were non-public military and scientific facilities subordinate to the Naval Forces. It was only in 1994 that the Utrish Dolphinarium was opened for public and did performances<sup>34</sup>. The history of the military use and study of dolphins in the Soviet Union, which remains virtually unstudied today, became the source of numerous myths that formed the basis of media publications, popular books and documentaries about dolphins and their unique abilities. Academic dolphin scientists, to some extent, contributed to the creation of the dolphinist myth. For example, a leading specialist in the biology of marine mammals, Professor Sergei Kleinenberg, author of popular brochures about dolphins and the preface to the Russian edition of John Lilly's *Man and Dolphin* (1965), wrote that during his years working with dolphins, he was convinced of their amiable attitude towards humans, and once even had an own experienced of their caring. Furthermore, he confirmed that the evidence of children taming wild dolphins, described by the ancient scholars – Aristotle, Pliny, and others – can currently be witnessed at the dolphinariums: "These were considered ancient legends, and only recently have these legends come to life and turned into real facts."<sup>35</sup>

In the late Soviet popular science literature and cinema, dolphins were presented as possessors of extra-human intelligence, primordial wisdom and an intimate connection with

the universe. A Soviet science fiction TV series called *People and Dolphins* (1983-1984, 4 episodes) probably raises the most relevant issues of human-dolphin contact: dolphins at war, miraculous rescues of humans by dolphins at sea, their high level of intelligence and paranormal abilities. For example, a group of dolphins trapped in a natural pool destroyed a rock blocking their exit to the open sea by using ultrasonic waves. Dolphins also possess the ability to transmit information telepathically: The heroes in the TV series spontaneously began to draw bizarre pictures, the ideas of which were inspired by dolphins. The series also depicts an experiment involving the prolonged isolation of a woman with a dolphin in a semi-aquatic house, and refers to similar research by John Lilly. Many movies and documentaries present the empathic (and equal) relationship between children and dolphins. For example, the cartoon *The Girl and the Dolphin* (1979) describes how a dolphin taught a girl to swim in the sea. After the dolphin was caught and taken to the dolphinarium, the girl released him, singing a song: "They say dolphins can speak. They speak; they do. See how their backs glisten in the sun! Dolphins are swimming towards us. Now they are going to talk." The cartoon reproduced the belief that dolphins could save humanity from all possible problems, so it was critically important to decipher their language and establish reliable communication.

Thus, Charkovsky created the *Aquaculture method* in an environment in which the idea of a "dolphin consciousness" was circulated very actively and thus became a constant source of inspiration for him. However, the radical way of transforming

humans into aquatic mammals, proposed by Charkovsky, was unique: First, a pregnant woman leads an aquatic lifestyle (she had to swim and dive) “accustoming the embryo to water,” then the baby is born into the water, which develops its “natural swimming reflex.” As a result, it is transformed into a *homo delphinus* – a kind of semi-aquatic creature.

## Igor Charkovsky and the international dolphinist community

Erik Sidenbladh’s *Water Babies*, published in Swedish in 1982 and quickly translated into several European languages (but not into Russian), introduced Charkovsky’s waterbirth method and the training of water babies to the Western world. Inspired by his ideas, a number of women from the USA, Germany, Australia and other countries decided to give birth to their children in the water<sup>36</sup>. Some of them, such as Americans Ana F. Costa (and her husband Gerald Krumland), succeeded in visiting the Soviet Union, where they met Charkovsky, despite the continued isolation of the Soviet Union from the Western world in the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>37</sup>

Charkovsky also made acquaintances with some members of the informal international dolphinist community, such as John Lilly, Jacques Mayol and Estelle Myers, during their visits to Moscow in the 1980s. For example, Michel Odent, a French obstetrician-gynecologist, and well-known natural childbirth enthusiast, says he first heard about “the amazing Russian doctor who takes deliveries in water” from Jacques Mayol in the late 1970s. A few years later, Odent received a postcard from Moscow signed by Mayol and Charkovsky, “who turned out not to be a doctor, but a swimming instructor.”<sup>38</sup>

Mayol visited the Soviet Union twice – in 1971 and 1982 – and on both occasions he took part in the Travelers Club TV show, which was very popular among the Soviet audience. The presenter introduced him as a “human dolphin” who could hold his breath underwater for five minutes. During the program, Mayol, without naming Charkovsky, talked about the water babies he had seen in Moscow: “We saw kids here who were 3-4 years old and who moved like fishes in the water. They had happy eyes and they laughed merrily. We saw that swimming was a pleasure for them. We saw here the implementation of an approach to up-bringing people capable of penetrating the depths of the ocean without harm.”<sup>39</sup>

**THE AQUACULTURE IDEAS** were close to Mayol’s reflections on the benefits of early water training for making the transition of people to life in the ocean. In his book, Mayol also talks about water childbirth. Starting with the controversial aquatic ape theory, he hypothesizes that the human genetic memory, and particularly the memory of the embryo developing in an aquatic environment in utero, retains memories of the marine lifestyle: A baby in the water “feels like it is in its native element, as if it had never left mother’s ocean.”<sup>40</sup> Mayol suggests the time a baby spent underwater should be constantly increased, thus reminding them of their instinctive reflex of apneist during freediving. “In two to three generations, *homo delphinus* will be able to double the current diving depth by up to 200 meters and quadruple the

apnea time by up to 16 minutes. There will be enough time to dream underwater and play with whales” – concludes Mayol.<sup>41</sup>

The *Dolphin Man* was not published in Russian until 1987, but Charkovsky had the first edition from 1979 in Italian, which his followers translated for him in the early 1980s. At the time, Charkovsky was actively involved in the aquatic training of babies-dolphins. In the spring of 1980, together with professional midwife, Irina Martynova, he did the first home waterbirth.<sup>42</sup> It is not known for certain, but it was likely the Mayol’s book inspired Charkovsky to create new spiritual practices (meditations) in search of an “inner dolphin” and some applied methods, for example, a so-called “artificial placenta.” He constantly invented various devices to train babies in water such as a frame on which the child was attached in a specific position, and a twisted spine or a fixture for nipples to feed a child underwater, as well as several other devices. These devices included something that resembled an “artificial placenta” – a bottle with water attached to a hose – so that the child could dive into the water using this device. Marina Dadasheva, who was present at one of these experiments, explains that this imitation of the placenta was actually “a superstructure for the child’s body to recreate its imaginary integrity.”<sup>43</sup> However, this experiment is likely a quote from Mayol’s book, where he talks about a technical solution to breathing underwater. Mayol admitted that thanks to the *artificial placenta* – a real mini-laboratory with a tube that could be connected to the vein of an amphibian man – voluntary apnea would occur when diving and the lungs would be “turned off.” Thus, a dolphin man would have access to a new type of respiration that is characteristic of the embryo.<sup>44</sup>

**SOVIET READERS** were inspired by dolphin imagery and research on human-dolphin communication in numerous science fiction and popular science publications<sup>45</sup>. Of course, the dream of a man-dolphin evoked an allusion to a famous science fiction novel, человек-амфибия [The Amphibian Man], by Alexander Beliaev (1928). The book was turned into a popular film in 1962 and has inspired some amateur and scientific projects for living underwater.<sup>46</sup> The hero of the book, Ikhtiander, could live in the sea thanks to shark gill transplant surgery. However, the book’s main themes are the loneliness of the hero, who was doomed to live away from the world of people, and the moral integrity of scientific experiments. These issues did not arouse Charkovsky’s enthusiasm, and he does not mention this novel anywhere.

“Psychics from New Zealand said that the dolphins had given their permission for an ocean childbirth.” With these words, Igor Charkovsky began one of his public presentations in 1982.<sup>47</sup> He referred to Estelle Myers, founder of the Rainbow Dolphin Centre in New Zealand and Wade Doak, guru of human dolphin research in New Zealand, who published an underwater diving magazine *Project Interlock*, collecting life stories of what he called people’s “dolphin initiated human interactions.” Myers learned about Charkovsky and his experiments with waterbirth from Jacques Mayol: “I was totally fired up, as a figment of my imagination had turned into reality.” Back in 1981, while meditating, she had the idea that water babies “would be the peacemak-

ers of the future”: They did not suffer from birth trauma, and their mothers having not experiencing the weight of gravity during the process of labor could quickly go into an altered state of consciousness.<sup>48</sup> So she started to take deliveries in water in Australia and New Zealand from 1981 to 1982 and invited Charkovsky to participate in one of the international waterbirth conferences that she organized. He was unable to attend but then she visited Moscow in 1985 to meet him in person and study water birthing. In Moscow, she took part in TV programs with Charkovsky, plunged into an ice hole in the Gorky Park together with members of the Healthy Family club, watched the aquatic training of babies, and even attended a home waterbirth. In her memoirs, Myers describes how she smuggled a video of this waterbirth out of the country in a package marked “ballet video.”<sup>49</sup>

John Lilly’s book *Man and Dolphin*, published in Russian in 1965, likely also served as a source of inspiration for Charkovsky. It seems that in his experiments, he decided to put into practice Lilly’s prediction from a later book: “Over the next 10-20 years, humanity will establish communication with representatives of other species, with some other creatures, perhaps not terrestrial, most likely marine, but most likely possessing a high level of mental development or even intelligence.”<sup>50</sup>

Lilly visited the Soviet Union in 1988 and met Charkovsky, whom he called an “interspecies communication enthusiast,” at the “Healthy Family” club in Moscow. Lilly was impressed by the abilities that the water babies demonstrated: “I was convinced that the children Charkovsky worked with had established exceptional contact with dolphins, they don’t even need music – they understand each other through intuition. Charkovsky’s disciples already know how to sleep in the water and find food in the sea. They are able to live in the ocean if dolphins take them into their pod. And apparently, there have already been such cases.”<sup>51</sup> Lilly also linked Charkovsky’s method with his ideas about a new human-dolphin civilization: “I like the idea that someday people will abandon the technical achievements that threaten them with death and return to the cradle of humanity – the World Ocean. The Homo Dolphinus will appear – a creature that combines the best qualities of two species.”<sup>52</sup>

IN 1989, CHARKOVSKY went abroad at the invitation of the New Age commune, the Findhorn Foundation<sup>53</sup> and gave lectures all over Britain, thereby entering the international New Age community. In the following years, he took part in various New Age events talking about his experiments with water babies. However, his demonstrations often caused an adverse response and were perceived as violence against children, and therefore unacceptable. Also, in the 1990s, the dolphin theme became less “esoteric” and increasingly popular in the mass media. Myers wrote: “It felt to me that the ‘dolphin’ craze had gone too far. There were masses of people around the world now, all wanting to play with and swim with the dolphins.”<sup>54</sup>

## Dolphin mythology among Charkovsky’s followers

Charkovsky’s ideas about babies-dolphins and their paranormal abilities were quite popular in the 1980s and early 1990s and are still promoted by a number of enthusiasts of the *Aquaculture method*. Vladimir Bagriansky recalls that there have been many cases of women giving birth at sea when dolphins were nearby. Still, dolphins attended underwater births, that Charkovsky and his followers dreamed of, never happened. Bagriansky is convinced that such childbirth is only possible through close spiritual contact between a pregnant woman, a child, and dolphins. However, some of Charkovsky’s followers claim that dolphins accompanied their sea deliveries. A homebirth midwife, Natalia Kotlar, traveled to Goa with her husband Alexey Sargunas in 2007 to give birth to her fifth child in the Indian Ocean. She perceived

this childbirth as an event of incredible spiritual unity with nature, which dolphins personified: “The dolphin swam quite close and hung, looking at my belly, without stopping. At the same time, I felt my baby moving inside me toward the exit. Our daughter floated into the water, opened her eyes and, oh, what a miracle! Smiled in response to our happy laugh. Alpha (the name

that Natalia and her husband gave to one of the dolphins) swam very close, and using her nose, very carefully pushed the child to the surface of the water. Her large blue eyes, as if from time immemorial, radiated a powerful stream of wisdom.”<sup>55</sup>

SEVERAL OF CHARKOVSKY’S partners and followers have contributed to the development of the dolphinist myth. For example, Evgeniia Igoshina was inspired by the telepathic communication of pregnant women and babies with dolphins in the summer camp “Golden Dolphin,” which was held by the “Healthy Family” club on the Black Sea coast in 1985. Igoshina recalls that “various miracles took place there”: Women and children meditated on dolphins and made metaphysical contact with them.

Based on this experience, she developed a form of meditation on dolphins and began teaching it to women on childbirth preparation courses. According to Igoshina, if a woman meditates during labor, whether at home or at a maternity hospital, she will always get help from dolphins: Pain relief or increased contractions in the event of weak labor. Such meditation is a kind of dolphin visualization: “Put on some nice music, light a candle. Relax and imagine you are swimming in the sea, dolphins are around you [...] They like you, their biofield makes the water native, the water supports you, caresses you [...] You see your child swimming nearby and playing with the dolphin baby [...] Talk to the dolphins, ask them to help you [...] When you feel really good, say goodbye and get out of meditation.”<sup>56</sup>

Unlike other followers of Charkovsky, Igoshina was not a midwife or a swimming instructor but had a special mission: She “possessed a communication channel” with dolphins. Igoshina

“WOMEN AND CHILDREN MEDITATED ON DOLPHINS AND MADE METAPHYSICAL CONTACT WITH THEM.”





Igor Charkovsky and his followers at the Maly Utrish Dolphinarium. "Golden Dolphin" summer camp, 1985.

PHOTO: VLADIMIR MEKLER

explains that new babies, whom she calls *sensitives* or *indigo children*, only wanted to be born in the water, so "they opened this channel to come to our world." Once, in meditation, she had a revelation that "people and dolphins were usually incarnating into each other" and that she had already met Charkovsky in a previous incarnation when they were both dolphins.

Vladimir Bagriansky has been practicing dolphin meditation since 1986 when Charkovsky "opened this path for him." He reveals that he can contact both the individual consciousness of dolphins and whales and the collective consciousness of cetaceans. Still, the most powerful for him are meditations on sperm whales thanks to their psycho-transforming effects. In his worldview, cetaceans are associated with the corresponding archetype in transpersonal psychology. They are a symbol of transition from the world of the dead to the world of the living, and vice versa, connected with the processes of conception, birth, death, and spiritual rebirth. In the teachings of Stanislav Grof, the dolphin archetype refers to the first perinatal matrix – tranquil embryonic existence associated with a feeling of endless bliss. Grof also appeals to the etymological similarity of the words "dolphin" and "uterus" in ancient Greek.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike Charkovsky and most of his followers, Bagriansky pays great attention to the ethical and environmental aspects of human-dolphin interaction. He is convinced that it is necessary to establish "interspecific cooperation": "To survive, people need the knowledge of cetaceans, and they need our protection. <...>

It is necessary to learn cosmic consciousness from cetaceans. Don't be afraid of death. To enjoy life. To love each other."<sup>58</sup>

### The Aquaculture project: Russian New Age or the late Soviet utopia?

Considering the late and post-Soviet movement for home water-birth and active infant raising in general, we can find many features connecting it with the New Age in the broadest sense of this phenomenon: yoga and psychic healing, parapsychology and transpersonal psychology channeling, paranormal abilities such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and others. It seems that Charkovsky's dolphinist myth also fits into the New Age paradigm: It was characterized by millenarian expectations and faith in the birth of miraculous children – babies-dolphins – who would herald the arrival of the New World. During Perestroika and especially in the 1990s, many New Religious and New Age people, ideas and literature emerged, gradually liberated from the *Iron Curtain*. Members of the waterbirth movement – Charkovsky's followers and his opponents – absorbed a variety of discourses and practices and endowed *Aquaculture* with different new meanings depending on their spiritual and intellectual preferences. However, the core of teaching remained esoteric: The oral transmission of knowledge, belief in a sacred sense, and hidden forces.

Charkovsky had been fascinated by the idea of aquatic training with infants since the early 1960s when he had his first experience of such training with his newborn daughter. The first follow-

ers came to him in the 1970s, but the movement only began to expand in the 1980s. Can we assume that during these years – in the so-called “era of stagnation” – some version of the New Age movement with features similar to those that appeared simultaneously in the West developed in the Soviet Union? Birgit Menzel, in her overview of occult and esoteric dimensions of the Russian New Age, describes a specific phenomenon of Soviet culture “when science merged with utopian thinking, when during the proclaimed “cosmic era” borders shifted between science and science fiction, certain disciplines, for example, telepathy, hypnosis, and parapsychology – three topics traditionally connected with spiritual and occult thought – all experienced a boom.”<sup>59</sup>

It should be taken into account that Soviet science adhered to the materialistic concept of paranormal phenomena. Professor Alexander Spirkin, vice-president of the USSR Philosophical Society and corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences, argued that Soviet scientists were ahead of their Western colleagues in understanding the nature of paranormal phenomena because they understood its material essence and saw their task of registering it by special devices.<sup>60</sup> A whole network of bioenergy information laboratories was engaged in fixing paranormal phenomena and searching for their material substrate. Many people with “psychic abilities,” including Charkovsky, who would have been classified as occult figures in other circumstances, were perceived as researchers working at the cutting edge of science. However, what is most important is the fact that Charkovsky’s teaching, in principle, does not imply spiritual growth and personal transformation, like the “search of inner dolphin” by Jacques Mayol. Only children trained in the *Aquaculture method* could become superhuman beings with high intelligence and paranormal abilities.

**THE OTHER CONSIDERATION** relates to Charkovsky’s methods, which were criticized, even by many of his followers. For example, he reprimanded “stupid mothers” who did not follow his instructions: “Women do not understand anything and do not want to understand, they behave like females, and work on ancient instincts that came from animals, they themselves do not know why they cannot understand simple things.”<sup>61</sup> Charkovsky’s demonstrations of aquatic training and dynamic gymnastics shocked New Agers in the West who invited him as natural childbirth and infant raising guru. Alexander Zemlinsky, who was Charkovsky’s translator during his first overseas tour from 1989 to 1990, perceived him as a kind of a chthonic deity: “He was like Demeter from a Greek myth when she was invited to work as a nanny to the family. And when no one was looking, she put the child on hot coals and tempered him in the oven. <...> Charkovsky is such wild black magic which, perhaps, really gives something, but is completely out of date.”<sup>62</sup> The methods that Charkovsky used in his workouts with water babies – feeding underwater, tying to different frames, a series of prolonged dives – demonstrated that he was guided by the principle of “violence for good.” So, we can consider the essence of the *Aquaculture* project as a kind of titanism – a utopian idea about the extreme plasticity of human nature and the possibility of its

radical transformation to achieve the ideal human. These ideas bring Charkovsky’s project closer to the early Soviet utopia with its notion of the omnipotence of man<sup>63</sup> and his power over nature then to New Age thought with its ethical and environmental agenda and values of “love” and “peace.”

Charkovsky’s critics and followers introduced issues about protecting nature and freeing whales and dolphins from captivity, promoting a peaceful life, spiritual search, and self-improvement, into the Russian movement for home birth, under the influence of the Western New Age thought. Thus, the *Aquaculture* project has undergone significant transformations. The movement has come a long way in its development from the 1970s to the 2000s: From the Soviet modernist utopia of creating a “new man” to the Russian variant of New Age. ✕

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