

Conference Report: Science und Séance
Symposium on the Occasion of the 150th Birthday of the Biologist
and Parapsychologist Fanny Moser (1872–1953)
(June 23, 2023, University Library, Freiburg i. Br.)

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“Like an antediluvian monster, occultism looms over our enlightened age. A strange, misunderstood thing that can neither be eliminated nor ignored – an affront to common sense” (Moser, 1935, p. 18).² A scathing verdict by parapsychologist Fanny Moser on occultism and the paranormal. So why a symposium about a woman who considered it necessary to find such clear words? Perhaps because Fanny Moser was much more than a parapsychologist. She was a scientist through and through, striving to bring order into the world, to penetrate the impenetrable and find the truth. At the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when the most important duty for women from good families was to marry well and start a family, Fanny was a rebel. A rebel whose strong desire to learn led her to be one of the first women to secure a place at the University of Freiburg i. Br. and later, as a biologist with a doctorate, to completely redefine the systematics of jellyfish research and finally to make thorough research into the paranormal her life’s work.

Despite her achievements, however, Fanny Moser is virtually invisible in the scientific community today. Even at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Psychohygiene (IGPP), which was mentioned in her will, she long held only the title of first patron, without any particular attention being paid to her life story or her contribution to parapsychology being sufficiently acknowledged. The Institute therefore made it its mission this year to put Fanny Moser in the well-deserved spotlight. Ina Schmied-Knittel, who was instrumental in organizing the

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2 Moser, F. (1935). *Der Okkultismus: Täuschungen und Tatsachen*. Ernst Reinhardt (translation by the author).

event, called the symposium itself a project close to her heart, as Fanny Moser's extraordinary achievements in women's and university history, in zoology and even in parapsychology have so far tended to be mentioned in footnotes and have rarely been given the recognition they deserve. A fate that Moser unfortunately still shares today with many female researchers, not only in parapsychology.

The fact that Fanny Moser's life and her work as a parapsychologist were met with great interest was evident right at the beginning of the symposium. Many people had accepted the invitation and traveled to Freiburg. The venue in the Freiburg University Library was also well chosen, as Moser had also bequeathed her private library to the IGPP. Her collection on the subject of occultism formed the basis of today's specialist parapsychology library with almost 60,000 volumes, which is probably unique in Germany and internationally.

Life and Work

Ina Schmied-Knittel was the first speaker to report on Moser's life and scientific career. Moser was born in 1872 into an extremely wealthy Swiss family. Her father Heinrich Moser (1805–1874) had married Fanny von Sulzer-Wart (1844–1925) in 1870. They had two children, Fanny (1872–1953) and Mentona (1874–1971), but he was unable to share in their lives as he died a few days after the birth of their second daughter. The considerable inheritance allowed the young widow and the two girls to lead an upscale lifestyle. Governesses, servants and private tutors prepared Fanny and Mentona for a life as upper-class daughters, whose main purpose was to marry in a manner befitting their station. However, both sisters defied convention and emancipated themselves from the expected roles. While Mentona saw her mission in life as helping the poor and later became a convinced communist and women's rights activist, Fanny saw her destiny in the sciences. At the end of the 19th century, when women had virtually no rights at German universities, Fanny Moser managed to enrol at Freiburg University despite initial rejection. After transferring to Zurich University, she specialized in zoology and finally obtained her doctorate in Munich in 1901 (against the opposition of some male professors). There she met her future husband Jaroslav Hoppe, with whom she moved to Berlin in 1903. Her work at the Natural History Museum there led to Moser's zoological specialty, jellyfish. She carried out numerous research assignments on this subject, completed study visits to foreign marine stations and published several extensive books and numerous articles in zoological journals, which were widely read.

The year 1914 then turned Moser's life upside down. A mediumistic séance she attended in Berlin, during which she experienced an impressive table levitation, challenged her scientific view of the world and ultimately led her to occultism. Shortly afterwards, her husband was

diagnosed with an incurable illness, which meant that he was soon confined to a wheelchair and had to be cared for by her. This was followed by a move to Hoppe's family in the Czech Republic. Fanny, torn away from her academic network and her zoological research, used the time to focus intensively on occultism, even if initially only as a stopgap, as she later described it herself. When her husband died in 1926, Fanny Moser moved back to Munich. Her two-volume work *Der Okkultismus: Täuschungen und Tatsachen* [Occultism: Deceptions and Facts] was published there in 1935. The Second World War finally forced Fanny to return to her native Switzerland. There, in 1950, she published her second parapsychological book *Spuk: Irrglaube oder Wahrglaube? Eine Frage der Menschheit* [Spook: Misbelief or True Belief? A question of humanity]. Fanny Moser then worked on a manuscript for a second part of this book, which, however, remained unfinished due to her death in 1953. The abrupt change in Moser's career from an established natural scientist to occultism seems surprising at first glance. However, Schmiel-Knittel also sees Moser's scientific approach as a strategy for overcoming crises. Science was the focus of Moser's life, and she did not differentiate between "true" and "false" science, but pursued biology and parapsychology with scientific methods and the utmost precision.

This biographical perspective was complemented by a presentation by Roger Nicholas Balsiger, a grandson of Fanny's sister Mentona. As a family chronicler, Balsiger has dedicated himself to the history of the Mosers for years and gave the guests present a personal and reflective insight into the relationship between the two sisters. According to Balsiger, both were pioneers, self-confident and creative, striving to break out of the straitjacket of tradition and push forward to new shores with their themes. With iron discipline, almost obsession, they both pursued their goals and defended their convictions, fighting against prevailing opinions and for the recognition of their own principles.

The First Female Academics

Fanny Moser thus gained importance in two fields of science, zoology and parapsychology, and her impressive career – quite unusual for women at the time – can be brought into today's scientific discourse and assessed through her extensive legacy. In her lecture, the Freiburg historian Birgit Heidtke regretted that this was often not the case with other female academics from the early days. She thus led on to a second thematic block, which focused on university research in the German Empire and the obstacles and opportunities faced by the first female academics, including Moser. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it was common practice in Germany that women were only allowed to attend universities as guest students. However, most people were denied a qualification for academic professions. It was not until 1900 that the tide began to turn and women were slowly able to establish themselves in research, as Heidtke was able to show with individual biographies of female students at Freiburg University.

The lecture by Michael Nahm, research associate at the Freiburg IGPP, dealt with Moser's scientific career. He presented Moser's extraordinary achievements in zoology and then showed that the switch to occultism was based more on similarities than on differences. Fanny Moser initially completed her doctorate on vertebrate lungs in Munich under the well-known zoologist Richard Hertwig. From her time in Berlin onwards, Moser then researched state and comb jellyfish, describing and naming a number of species for the first time and producing detailed identification aids and distribution maps. Her talent for both beautiful and meticulous zoological drawings and lithographs was also remarkable.

In addition to the redefinition, Moser also criticized the lack of quality standards in the description of jellyfish species and set herself the task of clearing up the existing literature and systematics. Parallels to her later research into occultism can already be found here, in particular the concern to separate deception from fact. Other parallels can also be seen in Moser's jellyfish drawings, which themselves often appear to be depictions of ghosts. Like the spook, the fragile creatures are at home in a dark environment, in a way eluding exploration as they are difficult to catch and even more difficult to preserve. Observing and classifying difficult material and special subjects are therefore part of both of Fanny Moser's fields of study, as is questioning established expert knowledge and her drive for innovation. According to Nahm, there are also obvious parallels between biology and occultism at the explanatory level. Vitalistic biology emphasizes that researching or explaining life and consciousness requires more than pure chemistry and physics. A fact that parapsychologists are likely to be aware of in their everyday work. Moser also mentioned vitalistic biology at least briefly in her book on occultism in 1935. However, she never developed a systematic link between her two fields of research herself.

Spook

The last part of the symposium dealt with the subject of hauntings, a topic that Moser was particularly interested in during the last years of her life. Walter von Lucadou and Eberhard Bauer, both experts in haunting research, made the start. In their lecture, they first addressed the well-known Joller case in the history of parapsychology, which also plays a decisive role in Fanny Moser's book on spook. Moser uses this case to illustrate central phenomenological content and structural features that are still perceptible in almost all other haunting cases today, for example with regard to the distinction between person- and place-related hauntings, but also the fact of the ephemeral and elusive character of haunting phenomena as such. In their lecture, Bauer and Lucadou also aimed to transfer Moser's work to the present day and place it in the context of current research approaches, such as the eidetic research approach of IGPP founder Hans Bender or quantum physics considerations. There is no doubt that the speakers share Fanny Moser's passion.

Moser's passion for spook research and her efforts to establish it in a university context were ultimately also the reason why she set up a foundation in her will. In addition to a certain financial contribution, Moser also established the awarding of a science prize for the best work in the field of hauntings research. First awarded in 1982 and only regularly awarded every three years since 2020, this year's Fanny Moser Prize went to historian Eveline Szarka for her doctoral thesis on hauntings in reformed Switzerland. Eveline Szarka accepted the certificate in the presence of her family before the final part of the symposium began with her presentation.

With humor and animated images, Szarka led the audience through the main theses of her work on hauntings in modern times, especially in the Swiss period of the Reformation and religious schism. In the 16th century, no one questioned whether ghosts actually existed; there was merely disagreement about where they came from and how to combat them. In most cases, ghosts were seen as the work of the devil, sent by God as a temptation, warning or punishment. Accordingly, the only way to overcome them was through repentance or prayer. Dispelling ghosts yourself, for example by hanging up Bible verses, or even interacting with them, was forbidden under penalty of law. However, this did not stop people from interpreting ghosts as conjured ghosts, invisible people or undead souls and taking appropriate measures. Attempts by the authorities to put a stop to this activity, for example by controlling priests, only led to the clergy being overburdened. Through Szarka's thorough research in Swiss archives, she not only succeeds in reconstructing the theological understanding of hauntings at the time, but also includes a practical everyday level: How did people react when their homes appeared to be haunted? Were there differences in the level of education and wealth of those affected? What interpretations circulated in secular authorities, and what beliefs in ghosts or the dead were accepted by the relevant authorities?

Conclusion

Fanny Moser dedicated her life entirely to science, giving preference to occultism in the second half of her life. Her vision of establishing parapsychology in an academic context and advancing hauntings research has now become a reality, even if institutes such as the IGPP still have to fight for legitimacy in some professional circles. The enthusiasm of the participants and the interesting contributions clearly showed that it is worth never losing faith and trust in one's own passion. In this sense, the speakers agreed, Fanny Moser embodied ambitious visions, stubborn perseverance and an unshakeable belief in the science of the future, which Moser saw occultism as. Character strengths that every scientist should adopt. For young scientists in particular, Moser's life can therefore also be read as a call to follow one's own interests, contrary to convention or the ideas of others, to set high goals for oneself and, if necessary, to question the status quo and establish something new.