

## Occultism as a Resource The Parapsychologist Fanny Moser (1872–1953)

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**Abstract** – Fanny Moser was a Swiss natural scientist who devoted the second half of her life to the study of occult phenomena, especially hauntings, and wrote two influential and extensive monographs on the subject. As one of the early female sponsors of the Freiburg Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health, she also provided the necessary support for the research institute and, in this respect, contributed to the establishment of a parapsychological research scene in Germany. The article first reconstructs Moser’s research biography, which is already remarkable because she was one of the very first female students and doctoral candidates in the German Empire. In a second step, it will be shown at which point and how exactly Moser was confronted with parapsychological topics and what role and function they had in her life. It will be shown that Moser’s engagement with parapsychology was situated in a dynamic field between subjective experiences of evidence, a personal crisis, and scientific self-empowerment, and that gender-specific factors also played a role. In this context it will be asked whether the publication of one’s own paranormal experiences and the introspection as a form of presentation represents a “typical female” aspect, since comparable statements by male parapsychologists are mostly absent in the scientific publications.

*Keywords:* gender – history of parapsychology – evidence – introspection – German Empire

### Okkultismus als Ressource. Die Parapsychologin Fanny Moser (1872–1953)

**Zusammenfassung**<sup>2</sup> – Fanny Moser war eine Schweizer Naturwissenschaftlerin, die die zweite Hälfte ihres Lebens der Erforschung okkultur Phänomene, insbesondere des Spuks, widmete und zwei einflussreiche und umfangreiche Monographien zu diesem Thema schrieb. Als eine der frühen Förderinnen des Freiburger Instituts für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene sorgte sie

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2 Eine erweiterte deutsche Zusammenfassung befindet sich am Ende des Artikels.

auch für die nötige Unterstützung des Forschungsinstituts und trug damit zum Aufbau einer parapsychologischen Forschungsszene in Deutschland bei. Der Beitrag rekonstruiert zunächst Mosers Forschungsbiographie, die schon deshalb bemerkenswert ist, weil sie eine der ersten Studentinnen und Doktorandinnen im Deutschen Kaiserreich überhaupt war. In einem zweiten Schritt soll gezeigt werden, wann und wie genau Moser mit parapsychologischen Themen konfrontiert wurde und welche Rolle und Funktion diese in ihrem Leben hatten. Es wird gezeigt, dass Mosers Auseinandersetzung mit der Parapsychologie in einem dynamischen Feld zwischen subjektiven Evidenzerfahrungen, persönlicher Krise und wissenschaftlicher Selbstermächtigung angesiedelt war und dass auch geschlechtsspezifische Faktoren eine Rolle spielten. In diesem Zusammenhang wird die Frage gestellt, ob die Veröffentlichung eigener paranormaler Erfahrungen und die Introspektion als Präsentationsform einen „typisch weiblichen“ Aspekt darstellt, da vergleichbare Aussagen von männlichen Parapsychologen in den wissenschaftlichen Publikationen meist fehlen.

*Schlüsselbegriffe:* Gender – Geschichte der Parapsychologie – Evidenzerfahrung – Introspektion – Deutsches Reich

### ***Introduction***

I begin this article with an unambiguous assertion: the history of German parapsychology in the 20th century would have been different without the contribution of Fanny Moser. At the end of her life Moser established a fund for parapsychological research and donated her library and part of her fortune to the “Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene” (hereinafter “IGPP”) in Freiburg. The IGPP had been founded in 1950 – barely three years before Moser’s death – as an independent research center for parapsychology. The success story of the IGPP as an internationally renowned research center for parapsychological topics is well known – and insofar Moser’s life and work is an essential part of the history of German parapsychology.<sup>3</sup> Apart from this, the academic development of parapsychology and its legitimization as a “normal” science were important concerns for Moser, who was herself a natural scientist and wrote two extensive books on occultism and poltergeists, which are considered important works of parapsychology today. However, it cannot be said that Fanny Moser is widely known, especially in non-German speaking countries. Her role as a researcher and promoter of German parapsychology has so far been perceived only in a sporadic way, except in very well-informed and interested professional circles.

This article wants to change that and bring up the role of women in German parapsychology. It reconstructs not only the remarkable biography of an early researcher, but also general questions in the context of gender-specific problems and limitations in science at the beginning of the 20th century. For international readers, this requires some knowledge of the German

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3 On the history of Freiburg parapsychology and the IGPP, especially under Hans Bender, see most recently Lux, 2021.

historical and cultural context. Because most of the sources used are from Germany, it is hoped that non-German readers will be able to take this specific viewpoint and recognize the incredible value of women like Fanny Moser.<sup>4</sup>

Let us briefly explain the structure and argumentation steps of this article: At first, we will describe Moser's biographical background and her path to becoming one of the first female students and PhD scientists in German Empire (section 2). In doing so, we outline the historical conditions and realities of educational policy to which the history of women in science is linked. In the late 19th century, the European universities were not gender-neutral in theory or practice. Higher education was clearly male-dominated, and the university enrollment (matriculation) of women was largely unthinkable or forbidden. Fanny Moser also had to struggle with such adversities and witnessed the resistance to women in the academic field personally. Moser's path to becoming a doctor of natural science is even more remarkable, and we will note that she became a renowned expert in zoology despite unfavorable conditions (section 3). Part four of the article describes Fanny Moser's way to psychical research. This was not at all automatically (or interest-based) predetermined, since Moser was (at least according to her own account) quite skeptical about occult topics as a young woman. Instead, she initially had other thematic interests and academic ambitions. Thus, it was ultimately private circumstances that brought Moser from zoology to occultism in the second half of her life. Her husband's serious illness required her domestic support and care. Relegated to intellectual isolation and academic solitude, Moser was looking for scientific challenges and chose occultism as her new field of research, whereby a subjective experience of evidence played a key role. The fact that she entered a controversial field of science leads to the question of the consequences associated with this decision. Section five explains that and how parapsychology provided some interesting resources for Fanny Moser. We will also see (section six) how she finally was able to secure her place in the history of science. In conclusion, the last part of the paper (seven) builds a bridge to the current question of this thematic issue and reconstructs aspects that go beyond the individual case. Here we will discuss, for example, the so-called "Mathilda effect" in science, the role of critical life events in women's professional biographies, and the question of personal paranormal experiences and belief systems.

### ***Fanny Moser (1872–1953): Biographical Sketch***

Because Fanny Moser has rarely been in the focus of the history of parapsychology (and especially not in an international/English-language context) a short biographical sketch will follow first.

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4 At this point, I would like to thank Cedar S. Leverett for her incredibly helpful comments, revision suggestions, and translation assistance. Her enthusiasm for Fanny Moser and all the other topics in this issue is impressive and her infectious enthusiasm made this a pleasure to work on.

Fanny Moser was born in 1872 into a very rich Swiss family. Her father, Heinrich Moser (1805–1874), was a factory owner who had achieved great prosperity by trading in clocks and watches in tsarist Russia. Her mother, Fanny von Sulzer-Wart (1848–1925), was more than 40 years younger than Moser and came from a distinguished Swiss family. The couple married despite of some resistance and had two daughters: Fanny (named after her mother) was the older one. Two years later, her younger sister Mentona was born. Only a few days after their birth, father Moser died completely unexpectedly after a cardiac arrest. His young wife inherited most of the legacy but was from then on her very own. At first, she bought a castle-like estate near Zurich, where she educated her daughters and attached great importance to an aristocratic, upper-middle-class society. The widow's social and intellectual



**Figure 1.** Fanny Moser. (Archive of the IGPP)

connections were far-reaching. In addition to writers, aristocrats and industrialists, academic personalities frequented the Moser house. A very influential group of visitors were psychiatrists: Eugen Bleuler, Auguste Forel, Oskar Vogt, Sigmund Freud – prominent names today in the history of psychiatry, at that time specialists in hypnosis and leaders in the treatment of hysterical disorders, from which the Moser widow also suffered. She repeatedly consulted (and changed) several doctors, including Sigmund Freud.<sup>5</sup>

But back to Fanny junior. In 1896, Moser was one of the first women ever to begin studying medicine in Freiburg, Germany. A little later, she decided to study biology and moved to

<sup>5</sup> In the history of psychology, Fanny Moser is one of Freud's first patients. Her case was published as a case vignette under the pseudonym *Emmy von N.* in Freud's early "Studies on hysteria" (Freud, 1895; see also Ellenberger, 2014).



**Figure 2.** Fanny Moser in Munich.  
(Archive of the IGPP)

the University of Munich for her degree, where in 1901 – again as one of the first women ever – she received her doctorate with a zoological dissertation. During her studies in Munich, she had met Jaroslav Hoppe (1878–1926), a Czech composer, and they married in 1903. The couple then moved to Berlin, where Fanny Moser aimed for an academic career. She did research at the Natural History Museum, wrote scientific papers on fish and jellyfish, which became her specialty, conducted studies and experiments at ocean and marine biology stations, and was on her way to become a recognized scientist and renowned zoologist. Then, however, several crises hit her: The First World War broke out in Europe, at the same time Jaroslav Hoppe was being diagnosed with an irreversible neurological disease, and in addition, a rift with her mother and the cancellation of her voluntary alimony and support led to financial problems for the couple. Fanny Moser had to leave Berlin and with her husband, who needed care, moved to his family in the Czech province.

Here Moser (who, incidentally, remained childless) cared for her husband until his death – a break in her private life and a rupture in her academic career, which had started out with great promise. And, at the same time, an explanation for Moser’s interest in occult research, which can be dated back to those years of nursing.

After the death of her husband, Fanny Moser returned to Germany (Munich) in the mid/late 1920s and wrote two voluminous masterpieces of German-language parapsychological research (Moser, 1935; Moser, 1950). In 1943 – Moser meanwhile had witnessed two world wars – she left Germany and settled in Zurich, where she lived until her death in 1953, researching and publishing about poltergeist phenomena until the end. Her decision to donate her legacy as the “Fanny Moser Foundation” to the IGPP must be seen in the light of her self-image as a scientist *and* parapsychologist: Her long years of research, combined with conviction, passion, but also

self-sacrifice and deprivation, should not only be considered as a scientific legacy for future researchers, above all, she wanted to establish psychical research as “science of the future” (Moser, 1935: 962) within university and society.

### *Fanny Moser’s Unusual Scientific Career*

From a gender perspective, the scientific biography of Fanny Moser is in fact role-specific, and this in several respects: First, she had to challenge normative role expectations, traditional images of women, and real barriers of admission at the end of the 19th century to realize her educational and professional aspirations at all. After that, private life events combined with expected gender roles (keyword: care work) interrupted her hard-fought status as a professional scientist. In the end, however, she managed the emancipatory retaking of her own life plans and the continuation of her scientific career, (only?) by choosing occultism as her object of research. We want to explore these aspects and start with Moser’s way of becoming a natural scientist.

The latter was not really intended, since at Moser’s time the life plans of upper-class girls and women almost conflicted with any emancipatory aspirations. Self-realization through (higher) education and employment was not an option in the prevailing gender relations of the bourgeoisie for a long time, and it took a while before women were allowed to study: it was not before 1901 (Heidelberg, Freiburg) and 1908 (Prussia) that women were admitted to German universities (Birn, 2015). In Switzerland, however, women were allowed to study much earlier: at the University of Zurich since 1867. The reason why Fanny Moser (she lived near Zurich) decided to study at the University of Freiburg in Germany is unfortunately unclear. Perhaps she wanted to get away from home, perhaps she had consciously chosen the Freiburg faculty, as one of the best.<sup>6</sup> Since German universities made exceptions for foreigners in the acceptance of women, Moser was able to apply there and, in 1896, – despite several obstacles and contradictions – she was indeed matriculated as one of the first female students in Freiburg. After some semesters of anatomy, Fanny Moser changed to biology and specialized in zoology. Shortly before the turn of the century, she moved to Munich to do her PhD under Richard Hertwig, a famous biologist who had made Munich University a center of zoological science. When she wrote and defended her dissertation in 1901, Moser was among the first women to receive a doctorate in Munich.

As far as the employment opportunities of the first female graduates were concerned, the situation was just as difficult. The transition from study to work was as problematic as admission

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6 Moser was certainly informed: The medical doctor and zoologist August Weismann, who at the time was considered one of the most important evolutionary theorists of the 19th century alongside Darwin and the founder of neo-Darwinism, was a professor at Freiburg University.



**Figure 3.** *Pyrostephos vanhoeffeni* (section). Drawing by Fanny Moser. In *Deutsche Südpolar-Expedition 1901-3, Band XVII, Tafel 29*. Georg Reimer, Berlin 1925. (Archive of the IGPP)

then moved to Berlin with her husband, because professional opportunities opened there: she was allowed to work for the Museum of Natural History. As far as the possibility of a university career or an equivalent scientific position was concerned, Moser's aspirations were limited. Salaried positions were available almost exclusively to male graduates, and even in the case of non-paid voluntary work or assistantships, women had to count on the acceptance and goodwill of professors and university authorities. After all, protection and relationships also played a role. After Moser's doctorate, it was her doctoral mentor, Hertwig, who supported her profes-

to universities had been before. At the beginning of the 20th century, women rarely found qualified positions and hardly had a chance of an academic career. Teaching licenses, (private) docent positions and professorships were limited to a habilitation degree, but only few women had such a degree.<sup>7</sup> In most German states, women's habilitations were still officially forbidden until 1920, which hindered women's admission to academic careers. Slightly more opportunities were offered by positions in the civil service, but this was mainly for teachers and lawyers. According to these difficult conditions in the academic field and the problematic situation of women's professional rights in general, the concrete career perspectives offered to the newly graduated biologist Fanny Moser were not very promising. So how was she able to make use of her academic qualification?

At first, Moser stayed in Munich and was allowed to do some minor assistant jobs for her mentor Richard Hertwig. She

<sup>7</sup> "Habilitation" (as a procedure for obtaining the highest university degree) has traditionally served in Germany as the formal qualification required to become a university professor. In the course of time it became customary in the German university system to write a "Habilitationsschrift" [habilitation thesis] after obtaining a doctorate if one wanted to obtain a professorship. The habilitation opens the way to a professorship. In the 20th century, German universities gradually admitted women to matriculation but not to habilitation. There were very few exceptions at that time.

sional ambitions by helping her with contacts, research projects and publication assignments, such as the position in Berlin. In addition, Hertwig had introduced her to the topic of jellyfish, setting the direction for a research field that became Moser's area of expertise. Her academic status, however, was still that of a "free" scientist, that means she received individual research, excursion and publication orders from non-university institutions (natural history museum, ministry), but was not employed. In principle, her research work was privately financed. It is therefore even more remarkable that Moser published more than 30 zoological papers in the years between 1902 and 1925, all of which appeared in prestigious journals. Her work – which often included first descriptions of unknown species as well as drawings of the animals that were both aesthetic and true to life – brought her more and more appreciation from other researchers. Both hard-working and independent, Moser built up a reputation as a renowned jellyfish expert, whose publications were cited and discussed in the specialist literature.

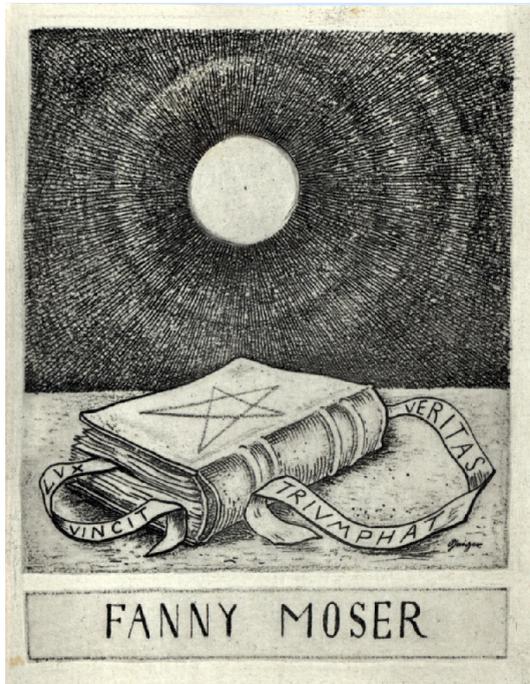
### *Moser's Way to Occultism*

While the historical conditions for Moser's professional development after her doctorate were apparently unfavorable, the results show a respectable career as a scientist. She must have been all the more disappointed when a private stroke of fate put an end to her career as a zoologist.

This hard blow of fate hit Fanny Moser in the middle of her creative period in Berlin. It was around 1915 when her husband was diagnosed with an terminal illness. With the diagnosis, his physical decline was sealed, inexorable and irreversible, and sooner or later he would be a nursing case. This was a double challenge in wartime and with financial difficulties. In 1917, the couple therefore moved to Hoppe's family in the Czech province, which meant that Moser was torn away from her scientific studies, professional activity, and intellectual fulfilment. Caring for her terminally ill husband on the edge of the world – this was not how she had imagined her life. Moser's diary notes reflect her despair; here is an extract: "(...) my situation is becoming increasingly bleak (...) My life is a heap of rubble (...) and all my plans and aspirations are destroyed. I have come to a terrible, hopeless dead end – no way out seems possible anywhere – should my life really waste away like this???"<sup>8</sup> In another passage she described the conflict between her own (not least scientific) claims and Jara's illness-related needs: "My life suffers from a dilemma – a dilemma between my own nature and character and the rights and claims of J[aras]. A middle way that does justice to both parts seems impossible (...) The guiding star, my support, and my happiness must now be my work – with it I must console myself, be content, and conquer the stormy heart."<sup>9</sup>

8 Archive of the IGPP, "Diary 1883–1942," dated: September 5, 1920 (Translations by ISK).

9 Ibid., dated: May 20, 1920.



**Figure 4.** Ex Libris Fanny Moser. (Archive of the IGPP)

professional caregivers, which made things easier and allowed freedom for her own interests. As a coping strategy, her scientific work played a major role, was for Moser a way to an end for autonomy, self-determination and not least distraction. At first, she was able to return to some zoological publication work that had been left behind. On the other hand, Moser was cut off from (new) zoological research material at her place of residence, as well as from laboratories, libraries, colleagues, collaborators, supporters and academic networks. In other words, Moser was virtually unemployed. She simply filled the gap with a new field of research: occultism. But how had it come about?

On the one hand, the entanglement is evident. When the care of her husband forced Fanny Moser to interrupt her zoological studies, when she was torn away from her relatively considerable and satisfying scientific career, and when she was forced to move from the vibrant city of Berlin to the Czech province, the subject helped her to find a welcome alternative in an already difficult time of private and social crisis experiences. On the other hand, we cannot assume that occultism was a more or less random stopgap for Moser. And in fact: concrete previous experiences and a steadily developing research interest also played a role. The central trigger

At the time she wrote these words, Moser was almost 50 years old and was obviously going through a serious life crisis. Her husband's illness had required her presence at home and care work for several years. Moser therefore had to stop her scientific activities. From today's perspective, we would characterize this situation as a critical life event, one that radically changes the existing life situation and forces the person to take measures of coping and adaptation. The possibilities for Moser were limited, however, because as his wife she could not free herself from her duties. Gender-specific fields of work and normative role had differentiated themselves in this regard, especially in the 19th century: Gainful employment was, after all, a male responsibility, while housework and care work were consistently female responsibilities. Somewhat wealthy, Moser could at least afford the support of profes-

was finally a personal experience Moser had had in Berlin in 1914, before her Czech exile. At that time, she had participated in a spiritualist séance more out of curiosity than anything else. Previously, she had heard from a friend that the medium, an inconspicuous Berlin housewife, was supposed to be able to “produce” phenomena and apparitions of the deceased. When Moser was visiting one of these sessions, she really experienced something extraordinary. After inexplicable rapping noises initially emanated from a large table, the table rose in front of the participants and floated up into the air several times, once even almost to the ceiling. Moser carefully examined the entire room and the table, but could discover nothing suspicious. She found no explanation for what she had observed, but ruled out fraud or manipulation for herself.<sup>10</sup> The experience knocked her completely off course and caused a real crisis of knowledge. For the first time and in an unexpected way, she felt confronted with the inadequacies of her scientific view of the world. Nevertheless, she initially suppressed the experience and continued with zoology, even spending a research period at a marine biology station in the Mediterranean.

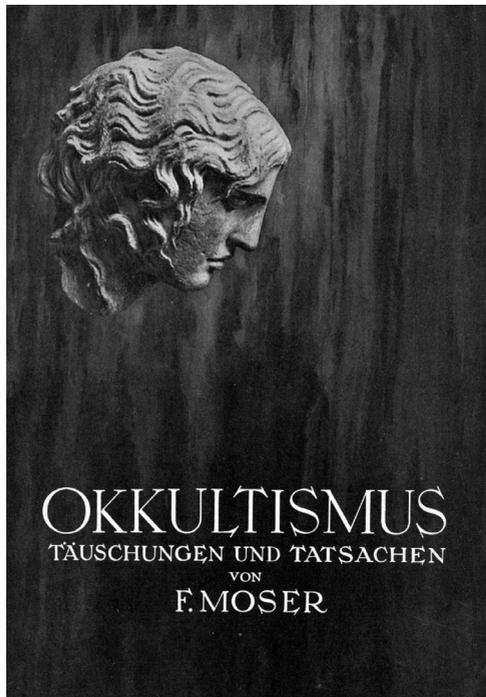
However, she did not let go of the subject completely. She searched literature, collected books about psychical research and became especially interested in the question of scientific explanations for occult phenomena, which she had experienced personally and quite convincingly. At the latest when she was isolated from her original field of research, this issue became an alternative field of research for Moser. In this respect, Moser’s engagement with occultism represents not only a private field of interest, but also an emancipatory self-empowerment. As a scientific research topic, occultism, being a relatively readily available resource (literature study), offered her a positive solution to her conflict between domestic concerns and scientific ambitions. Whether this was a “career-suitable” decision will be discussed in the following section.

### *Occultism as a Resource*

With scientifically skilled enthusiasm, Moser worked her way into occultism, collecting and reading almost all parapsychological literature, researching, and analyzing historical sources and current reports. About 15 years after leaving Berlin (and 10 years after the death of her husband), she published her book *Der Okkultismus – Täuschungen und Tatsachen* [Occultism – Deceptions and Facts] (Moser, 1935). In two volumes and nearly one thousand pages, it dealt with somnambulism, hypnosis, telepathy, messages from the deceased, precognition, apparitions, autoscopies, mediumism, apports, physical materializations, and human mediums. Countless historical sources, contemporary eyewitness reports and other case material were examined by Moser regarding the real nature of the phenomena. Her point of view was an animistic one, i. e. she primarily searched for scientific principles and discussed all possibilities of

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10 For the more detailed circumstances of this event, cf. Schellinger, 2017.



**Figure 5.** Book cover of Fanny Moser's *Der Okkultismus – Täuschungen und Tatsachen*, 1935. (Archive of the IGPP)

deception and fraud. She addressed the fleeting nature of most paranormal phenomena, but did not doubt in principle the existence of occult phenomena. Fanny Moser was convinced that there is an unexplained residue of facts for which no conclusive scientific explanations exist so far, and that the interest in occultism is therefore not per se unscientific.

Immediately after this publication, she moved on to the subject of hauntings. Moser continued her research for another 15 years and in 1950 her second book was published: *Spuk – Irrglaube oder Wahrglaube. Eine Frage der Menschheit* [Haunting – Misbelief or True Belief. A question of humanity]. Here Moser presented historical and contemporary haunting cases, discussed the cultural and historical significance of the subject, and reconstructed recurring patterns and characteristics of haunting reports. She did not manage to complete a second volume, in which she intended to provide a scientific explanation of haunting phenomena, because of her advanced age.

Moser never returned to her old research subject, jellyfish. The circumstances of her private life had separated her scientific vita into two parts – remarkably in the middle of her life. But occultism did not become just any available research substitute for Moser. Similar to the jellyfish before that, it became at least an equivalent life theme. Not only because the subject would occupy her for the rest of her life, but also because she struggled until desperation to demonstrate the scientific nature of the phenomena. While her initial attitude towards occultism was based on her socialization as a critical natural scientist, over the years she became a convinced researcher of occultism. It seems that the more intensively she dealt with occult phenomena and hauntings, the less she could and wanted to hide her intention to present undeniable evidence. She had finally started with this ambitious goal and had become passionate about the subject also because she saw in it both an epistemological challenge and a potential for (her) academic success. In her diary she had written: “The great goal in life is my occult work – a work for the future – I know that here lies a great, infinitely promising field of research which will revolutionize our whole thinking and

knowledge (...) – if I should succeed in helping it to a scientific breakthrough, then my life would have been worth all its struggles.”<sup>11</sup>

As an academic science representative, she hoped that haunting and occultism would enable her to investigate the commonly rejected anomalies based on strictly rational, scientifically trained research, and thus help to advance science in general. In the context of her private circumstances, occultism also represented a potential resource, and this in several respects: as regaining of her lost autonomy as a researcher, as an easily available field of research (unlike jellyfish), and – quite self-consciously – as a field with potential chances for personal success. Given her private researcher status, Moser did not have much to lose anyway. Even as a zoologist, she had no concrete chances of employment or promotion in the male-dominated science and university sector – despite her scientific qualifications, long-standing reputation, and proven expertise. In any case, even occultism did not change her personal research situation as a private scholar in a “home office.” Basically, Moser worked all her life as a private scholar in the original sense of the word: personally motivated, privately financed, and without an institutional network.

At most, a loss of status would have come from another side, because it must not be forgotten that occultism is a scientifically controversial field – or, to use a more neutral term: a heterodox field.<sup>12</sup> The debates about the epistemic status of the phenomena as well as about the field of research itself (as “real” science, pseudoscience or parascience) have been always virulent. Until today, the epistemic status of parapsychology is negotiated in permanent controversy, and even at Moser’s time parapsychology was not an academic discipline. But the scientific distance is only one side of the coin. The other is the great popularity of psychical research, even among scientists. From the very beginning, the occult exerted a strong fascination on scientists and (albeit very few) women scientists, combined with the vision of understanding the phenomena within the framework of scientific thought. Last but not least, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the modern sciences themselves had prepared the field: The discovery of electromagnetic waves, electricity and X-rays, the invention of wireless telegraphy, telephone and radio – the list of scientific findings that were considered to confirm (previously) hidden, invisible forces is long (see e.g., Voss, 2020). Internationally renowned researchers such as William James, Max Dessoir, Charles Richet, C.G. Jung, Pierre Janet, and many others were intensively involved in parapsychology, publishing books and essays and participating in the heated debates about the nature and status of occult phenomena and the possibility of their recording by scientific methods. With two extensive books, several essays, and numerous favorable reviews, Moser finally joined the circle of such scientists. She had also created a small network of scientific con-

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11 Archive of the IGPP, “Diary 1883–1942,” dated May 20, 1920.

12 On the concept of heterodoxy, see Schetsche & Schmied-Knittel, 2018. See also Schmied-Knittel, 2021.

tacts. Her correspondence reflects numerous contacts with notable colleagues and renowned scientists of her time: Eugen Bleuler, a Swiss psychiatrist and humanist most notable for his contributions to the understanding of mental illness (he coined the term “schizophrenia”), C.G. Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology (he wrote Moser the preface for her “Spuk” book), or Pascual Jordan, a German theoretical and mathematical physicist who made significant contributions to quantum mechanics and quantum field theory.<sup>13</sup> Moser’s scientific contacts also included the most renowned representatives of German parapsychology: Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, Carl Graf von Klinckowstroem, Hans Bender, Gerda Walther, Hans Driesch, and she also corresponded with colleagues from England and the USA. She sent copies of her books to Gardner Murphy, Harry Price, Eileen Garrett, and J.B. Rhine. Although there were individual reviews as a result, due to language barriers Moser’s work has received little attention in the English-speaking world (to this day). Moser’s efforts to realize authorized translations of her two works ultimately failed because of financing.

But even in Germany and in her Swiss homeland, Moser’s position as parapsychological authority is not a hundred percent success story. Although she was able to find a publisher for her books, she had to finance them exclusively privately. Due to her lack of institutional affiliation, she also had to manage her own arrangements: publishers, reviews, multipliers, supporters, publication opportunities. In addition, the social developments were very unfavorable. When Moser’s *Occultism* was published, Germany was on the edge of the Second World War and, at the latest after Rudolf Hess’ flight to England, astrology, esotericism and occultism were becoming negative target of the Nazis.<sup>14</sup> Moser’s book was also temporarily confiscated. Accordingly, there were few opportunities for publication during this time, and this perhaps explains why Moser published only a few parapsychological papers. Her relatively limited list of publications could, on the other hand, be the reason why she often found herself unmentioned. Colleagues like Tischner, Driesch or Bender more often achieved to be addressed as an authority by the media or by other researchers. They also succeeded in making an academic career “despite” parapsychology: Hans Driesch was (however already in the 1920s) a chair holder in Leipzig. Hans Bender got a professorship in Strasbourg under the Nazis. The male colleagues were also in responsible positions in parapsychological associations. Driesch, for example, temporarily

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13 Reading Moser’s papers, it is at the same time remarkable how little Moser intended to build a bridge between her original discipline of biology and parapsychology. Colleagues of the time had certainly stated their position on theoretical and methodological issues and even established a kind of neo-vitalistic paradigm. Hans Driesch (1867–1941), like Moser a zoologist and holder of a philosophical chair at the University of Leipzig, for example, belonged to this tradition (cf. Nahm, 2021). After all, Moser cited Driesch’s book, but she did not contextualize it.

14 For example, compare Staudenmaier, 2014; see also Black & Kurlander, 2015.

was the president of the Society for Psychological Research, and Hans Bender made himself a director when he founded his own parapsychological research institute in 1950.

It cannot be said that Moser had no ambitions in this regard. On the contrary the university location of parapsychology was an important concern for her. However, when she underlined her parapsychological expertise with her second book on hauntings, she was almost 80 years old and thus recognizably old for academic influence. And so, she used another way to make a name for herself: Her research should become effective as a scientific legacy within the framework of a foundation.

### *Fanny Moser Becomes Immortal*

There was no question for Fanny Moser that her parapsychological research had to be continued. She had already outlined the corresponding program in her first book on occultism. At that time, she had stated as the most important result that despite all possibilities of deception, fraud and alternative explanations, there is an undeniable rest of occult facts which passes all critical examinations and proves “that occultism is more than misbelief” (Moser, 1950: 21). In this respect, science has no right to ridicule, reject, or ignore the occult reports, but rather has a responsibility to “examine them scientifically on all sides” (Moser, 1952: 13). Apart from that, as Moser points out, occultism also touches on quite fundamental research topics and theories: sensory illusions, hallucinations, perceptual processes, and the role of the unconscious, for example, and, of course, epistemological questions of philosophy. With this potential, which was both innovative and progressive, occultism was in Moser’s eyes “a science of the future” (Moser, 1935: 962) and therefore in need of support as well as promotion. Moser had put the idea of transferring her scientific estate and her remaining capital to a foundation in the 1940s. She made several conditions for her future foundation: Content-wise, the foundation should be concerned with the research of occult phenomena, especially hauntings; the foundation should be supported by academic experts and an established scientific institution (and ideally in Switzerland); and it should be named after Moser. However, several inquiries in her Swiss home country were unsuccessful because the institutions contacted (including the C. G. Jung Institute and the University of Zurich) demonstrated little interest or commitment. Fortunately, things were different with Hans Bender in Freiburg. Moser and Bender, who was 35 years younger, had known each other since the mid-1930s, when Bender, a young university psychologist, had been one of the first in Germany with a doctoral thesis on a parapsychological topic. Over the years, they were in regular, even friendly, dialogue, informing each other about the status of their work, discussing parapsychological developments and interesting case studies. From the beginning, Moser was impressed by Bender, a young, dynamic academic and a thoroughly charming and charismatic type. He also represented a clearly scientific approach



**Figure 6.** Professor Dr. Hans Bender, founder of the IGPP in front of a painting of Fanny Moser.  
(Archive of the IGPP)

to occult phenomena and was well connected in the academic field. When Bender founded his own parapsychological research institute in Freiburg in 1950, things became clear for Moser. She arranged in her will that the Fanny Moser Foundation should belong to Bender's institute and handed over her research library, her scientific heritage and finally – quasi as a monetary value – her Munich properties. In this way, the Fanny Moser Foundation made possible a basic equipment of Bender's institute. In 1954, at the latest, Bender was appointed regular professor at the University of Freiburg, where he formed the basis for the academic establishment of parapsychology. Apart from that, it was especially the haunting cases and Bender's field investigations that attracted great public attention and made the Freiburg institute and its director famous. In Moser's sense, he had successfully advanced the topics Moser had initiated. Bender

was grateful and loyal to Moser's legacy. Therefore, in the 1970s, he arranged for a new edition of Moser's books (Moser, 1974; Moser, 1977). If Moser might not have been given full attention during her lifetime, she finally saved her position as author of two standard works of German parapsychology of the 20th century with these new editions – each provided with well-meaning introductions by the meanwhile extremely popular Bender. In the context of her foundation at the Freiburg Institute, Moser's scientific legacy is still effective today and her vision of a "science of the future" has become reality. And the scientist Fanny Moser became immortal.

### *Conclusion*

The presentations of Moser's scientific curriculum vitae from a gender perspective should have been plausible. So let us briefly summarize: Fanny Moser's academic career fell into a time when women had to fight for access to university and for an academic career and remained underprivileged. Moser had personally experienced the patriarchal resistance against girls at secondary schools, women at universities and married scientists in occupations – and had self-confidently opposed it from the very beginning. The conditions under which she could conduct research and work were anything but career-friendly. Nevertheless, Moser earned an expert status in zoology, conducted research (even if mostly unpaid) at museums and for other non-university institutions, published in scientific journals, and these works were also cited in academic circles. But this is only the first half of her academic life, because a critical life event forced her to give up her scientific activities. In addition, there was a paranormal demonstration that shook Moser's scientific point of view. In this private crisis, she made a substantive break that may seem unfamiliar from today's perspective. Fanny Moser decided to focus on psychical research and thus became a marginal scientist in a double sense: a private researcher in the controversial field of parapsychology. But her decision was also associated with opportunities. It meant a new, above all epistemic challenge for the unemployed scientist and a return to her former autonomy, which she had lost in her (unintended) role as a care-given wife. It was certainly not her first intention that she would end up having a long-lasting influence as one of the early benefactors of a successful scientific institution. Nevertheless, one cannot deny her philanthropic motives. With the image of her influential and successful father in mind, who had already made himself immortal as an industrial pioneer during his lifetime (with the construction of a railroad line and a hydroelectric power plant) and is revered in her Swiss homeland to this day, Fanny Moser probably also had her sights set on a "monument". In this respect, a foundation, especially one named after Moser, was an opportunity to strengthen her reputation beyond her death and to secure the official respect that she received little of as a young natural scientist.

So much for Moser's specific case history, which may be what Alvarado (1989: 237) characterized as "contribution approach." By this he meant contributions that mainly focus on the

effect of specific women on specific ideas – in other words, single cases. It is obvious that such accounts are rather limited regarding broader questions and generalizations. Therefore, I have tried to make connections to general topics wherever possible. Finally, I would like to try to identify corresponding topics of the complex “women and parapsychology,” but also to point out open questions in this context.

First, **gender relations and historical aspects**: Moser’s case provides a deep insight into historical processes, especially into the effects of social change between the 19th and 20th century. Her educational and professional biography illustrates very clearly the initiation of a corresponding of cultural change and its implications for gender relations. This is also where the benefit of a gender-specific perspective is to be found: Moser’s biography reflects the “great” history with its developments, contradictions, and transformations. Even if questions about the educational discrimination of girls and women, the history of women’s studies, or the gender history of academic professions have been sufficiently researched in the meantime, this perspective is still worthwhile. Single case studies broaden the empirical basis or lead to new aspects. Moreover, they enable the introduction of actors who have rarely or never been in the focus of the history of science. It is significant that the estate of Fanny Moser – after all, the first patron of the Freiburg Institute – lay for decades almost unsorted in the research archive of the IGPP.<sup>15</sup> (And isn’t it equally significant that it took an interested female scholar to initiate this research project?)

Second, **Matilda Effect**: The fate of the “invisible” researcher is one that Moser shares with many women. Carlos S. Alvarado and Nancy L. Zingrone were among the first to point out this structural deficit in parapsychology. As academic representatives of the field and experts in the history of science, they observed a large gap of women in parapsychology on different levels. For example, Zingrone (1988: 325) criticized that the perception of and engagement with women from within the field was even less than in other disciplines (that also did not stand out much at the time). Alvarado (1989: 234) also mentioned the lack of attention paid to female scientists in parapsychology, as evidenced, for example, by the lower frequency of biographical works on women (“almost nothing has been done on the work of women parapsychologists”). If at all, only a few popular representatives were mentioned (and even these less frequently than their male colleagues), while the equally important work of lesser-known women was neither considered nor appreciated, or was easily dismissed as “assistant work” (Alvarado, 1989: 241). The lack of attention in the history of parapsychology is only one side, the other concerns the current participation of women in the parapsychological enterprise, such as career path trajectories, employment opportunities and publication practice, that even today are mostly biased to

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15 There are exceptions and some publications with special interests, e.g., Schellinger, 2017, and Bauer, 2010. Previous biographically oriented accounts date from the 1980s: Wanner, 1981, and Bauer, 1986.

the disadvantage of female researchers. A 1991 conference of the Parapsychological Foundation systematically focused on these issues (Coly & White, 1994). The papers addressed a wide range of topics: from the importance of historical female parapsychologists (scholars as well as mediums), to the observed hierarchy of experimental (mostly male researchers) and case studies (female researchers), to the question of gender differences in belief in the paranormal (“Are women more sheepish?”), to the discussion of feminist approaches. Although the contributions were manifold and the position of parapsychology is very special due to its scientifically controversial status, the participants came back again and again to general structural deficits towards women or female researchers and recognized social, institutional, and cultural influences of gender in the field of science in general. Whether parapsychology or psychology, biology or nutritional science, pedagogy, or art: women generally receive less recognition than men, even if their work is just as important. The phenomenon of how female scientists’ contributions can be overlooked or misattributed to their male colleagues is known as the “Matilda Effect.” The effect was postulated by the historian of science Margaret W. Rossiter and published in 1993, after that PF conference (Rossiter, 1993). From today’s point of view, the initiators of 1991 must therefore be considered to have had a visionary feeling for groundbreaking questions. At the same time, it is shocking how little has been done in this respect. There is still room for improvement, and there is still a lot to be done.

Third, **gender-specific circumstances and critical life events**: This point refers to the observation that gender-relevant dispositions influence women’s life stories. In Moser’s case, for example, a women-specific role expectation required her to quit her zoological work and led her to parapsychological research. The example points to the need to consider not only the above-mentioned historical conditions, social problems, and societal contexts, but also women-specific life events, such as conflicts between domestic issues and a professional life. Alvarado (1989: 243) provided the impressive example of Louisa Rhine, to which Moser’s case easily fits. For clarification, he is quoted again here:

In the case of L. E. Rhine, for example, we know that her work with children was the only type of work she could during the period of her life when she was confined to her home (...) Unable to escape her domestic work, she administered ESP tests to her children and neighborhood children. In this case a gender-specific constraint led her to a particular type of parapsychological research.

In fact, both cases represent women’s specific life situations: child education here, care work there – basically a typical work-life balance problem for women. Both cases also show what positive outcomes can follow personal crises. Various meta-analyses and studies have shown that women have a higher level of stress due to critical events than men and experience significantly more critical events, especially in the context of interpersonal relationships (cf. Filipp &

Aymanns, 2018, esp. pp. 361ff.). Nevertheless, there are good reasons for including the gender perspective only as one analytical dimension among numerous others. Do not almost all people have experiences with critical life events? And are not there also personal life crises among male researchers? Other personality characteristics, such as age, education and, not least, religiosity, are also significant for the perception, occurrence, and management of critical life events. The extent to which people emerge strengthened from a crisis depends not only on their gender. Especially in the case of spiritual crises, the perspectives of developmental psychology, memory research, biography and conversion research provide at least equally fruitful approaches.

Fourth, **experiences of evidence and paranormal beliefs:** Of course, Moser's second career as a parapsychologist can be reconstructed in the context of the educational biography outlined above, with its gendered and historical backgrounds. Far too often, however, it is overlooked that the scientific investigation of such anomalies often corresponds with concrete evidential experiences and personal convictions. The biologist Fanny Moser experienced such a paranormal event during a mediumistic séance. The experience triggered a deep emotional and intellectual crisis and in basically a conversion. The formerly skeptical natural scientist was suddenly convinced that what can be seen and proven is only the surface of an essentially mysterious world. Moser herself declared the occult table levitation as the "hour of birth" of her "new mind-set" (Moser, 1936: 30) and even published her conversion experience as well as other personal points of contact with occult topics and experiences. In her first book on occultism, she described her personal experience in detail and even declared the levitation experience to be the very cause of her research (Moser, 1935: 33–47). Like most conversion stories, Moser's account shows a typical "trinity". The central motif is always a turning point (or conversion): In Moser's case, her scientific life with a skeptical attitude before the event, the evidential experience itself (and an associated crisis of knowledge or science), and finally a new, life-changing belief system or at least a revised scientific worldview. We find such descriptions of personal paranormal experiences also in publications of other representatives of parapsychology, such as Gerda Walther, Louisa Rhine and Rhea White. The scientific literature does indeed contain indications that women are generally more willing to share personal experiences and private life crises, while men are generally less willing to open about themselves (Filipp & Aymanns, 2018: 364). It is an interesting question whether the autobiographical presentation of personal crisis and exceptional experiences in the context of parapsychology is rather a female characteristic. At this point, however, we can only speculate. The incomplete knowledge of the literature forbids a hasty judgment. In direct comparison with Moser's colleagues and contemporaries, however, it is noticeable that private themes are less obvious in the publications of the men. It is true that, as far as the persons Hans Bender, Hans Driesch, C. G. Jung, or Eugen Bleuler are concerned, personal encounters with paranormal events and their positive attitudes towards occult phenomena are well known. In private letters, for example, Hans Bender repeatedly

communicated dreams with paranormal content to Fanny Moser. But these references mostly come from third hand, from anecdotal reports of colleagues or biographies written later. To the best of our knowledge, neither Bender, Driesch, nor Bleuler have published their personal paranormal experiences in their *scientific* writings or declared their own paranormal experiences publicly as starting point of their psychical research. Whether the principled insistence on the permanent separation of science and séance is appropriate in every case is another question – and, in my opinion, a question beyond gender differences. Without her openness to séances and her insistence on paranormal phenomena, the remarkable life of Fanny Moser would certainly have been less remarkable. And the success story of Hans Bender and the German parapsychology in the 20th century would have been different without her contribution.

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## Okkultismus als Ressource. Die Parapsychologin Fanny Moser (1872–1953)

### *Erweiterte Zusammenfassung*

Im letzten Drittel des 19. Jahrhunderts geboren, musste sich Fanny Moser (1872–1953) ihren Weg in die Wissenschaft noch hart erkämpfen. Nach erfolgreicher Promotion zunächst anerkannte Meeresbiologin, widmete sie sich in der zweiten Lebenshälfte ausschließlich parapsychologischen Fragen und war überzeugt, dass im Okkultismus die „Wissenschaft der Zukunft“ liegt. In der Konsequenz stiftete sie ihr Vermögen dem Freiburger Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene und trug damit zur Etablierung einer parapsychologischen Forschungslandschaft in Deutschland bei. Der Beitrag rekonstruiert zunächst Fanny Mosers Wissenschaftsbiographie, die schon deshalb bemerkenswert ist, weil sie Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts zu den allerersten Studentinnen an deutschen Universitäten gehörte. In einem zweiten Schritt zeigen wir, wann und wie Moser mit parapsychologischen Themen konfrontiert wurde, und fragen, welche Rolle und Funktion diese in ihrem Leben einnahmen. Es wird deutlich, dass Mosers Hinwendung zur Parapsychologie in einem Spannungsfeld zwischen subjektiven Evidenzerfahrungen, persönlichen Krisen und beruflichem Autonomiestreben angesiedelt war und dass dabei auch geschlechtsspezifische Aspekte eine Rolle spielten. Diese betreffen zunächst die allgemeinen historischen Bedingungen und bildungspolitischen Realitäten von Frauen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts, als das Hochschulwesen noch eindeutig männerdominiert und die Immatrikulation von Frauen weitgehend undenkbar oder sogar verboten war. Umso bemerkenswerter ist der akademische Werdegang Mosers, die trotz widriger Umstände in Zoologie promoviert und eine anerkannte Expertin für Quallen wird. Frauenspezifisch waren schließlich auch die Umstände, die Moser in der zweiten Hälfte ihres Lebens von der Zoologie zum Okkultismus führten. Die schwere Krankheit ihres Ehemannes erforderte ihre Unterstützung und häusliche Pflege und damit letztlich die Aufgabe ihrer ohnehin „untypischen“ Berufstätigkeit. Zu akademischer und intellektueller Isolation verbannt, suchte Moser in dieser Phase nach neuen Herausforderungen und wählte den Okkultismus als künftiges Forschungsfeld – nicht zuletzt, weil sie etwa zeitgleich ein tiefgreifendes persönliches Evidenzerlebnis bei einer mediumistischen Séance gemacht hatte. Dass Moser sich mit Fragen nach Mediumismus, Spiritismus, Spuk, Erscheinungen, Telepathie, Präkognition und ähnlichen Phänomenen in ein durchaus umstrittenes Wissenschaftsgebiet vorwagte, ist eine Sache. Wir werden aber auch aufzeigen, dass der Okkultismus für die Wissenschaftlerin ebenso interessante Ressourcen bereithielt und ihr schließlich sogar die Möglichkeit eröffnete, sich einen Platz in der Parapsychologiegeschichte zu sichern. Der Beitrag endet mit einer über den Einzelfall hinausgehenden Reflexion über den Gewinn einer geschlechterforschenden Perspektive, insbesondere was die Rolle kritischer Lebensereignisse und den Stellenwert von persönlichen Erfahrungen und weltanschaulichen Haltungen in den Berufsbiographien von Frauen und Männern betrifft.