

A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND: THE CLAIRVOYANCE OF STEFAN OSSOWIECKI by
 Mary Rose Barrington, Ian Stevenson, and Zofia Weaver. Jefferson,
 NC, and London: McFarland, 2005. Pp. 189, \$39.95. ISBN 0-7864-
 2112-6.

Writing in the late 1920s, Nobel Prize winner and physiologist Charles Richet said that experiments with a Polish psychic convinced him there was no doubt about the existence of the sixth sense. In fact, he argued that even if those experiments were the only ones available "they would be sufficient to carry conviction with them" (Richet, n.d., p. 162). The psychic in question, engineer Stefan Ossowiecki (1877-1944), seems to have been forgotten by many contemporary parapsychologists. The book reviewed here is a reminder of Ossowiecki's legacy.

Mary Rose Barrington, Ian Stevenson, and Zofia Weaver have conducted a great deal of research on the life and ESP performances of Ossowiecki. This psychic was particularly successful in perceiving the content of sealed messages or drawings. In addition, he could obtain information about people, as can be seen in his attempts to locate missing persons and in those instances in which he was able to say something about the individuals who had prepared the target materials.

In the introduction Stevenson argues that Ossowiecki "demonstrated clairvoyance of a range and quality no one has exceeded, at least under experimental controls" (p. 1). This is followed by an interesting biography of Ossowiecki by Weaver that uses, among other sources, the psychic's autobiography. He was said to be a trusting person and very helpful to others. During the Nazi occupation of Poland, many people came to ask him to use his talents to locate missing relatives, and he is said to have tried to help all of them. Furthermore, according to Weaver: "Ossowiecki's absent-mindedness was . . . legendary. He was always forgetting appointments,

making arrangements to meet different people in different places at the same time, losing things, forgetting names and faces" (p. 11). This suggests that Ossowiecki was prone to have dissociative experiences in daily life.

In a section of the biographical chapter about Ossowiecki's psychic process, Weaver says that during his visions Ossowiecki lost his sense of self: "He saw a live film, with all the internal and external details. . . . It was said as if he was seeing everything from a bird's-eye view" (p. 18).

Before presenting the best evidence for Ossowiecki's ESP, the authors include a brief discussion of evidential issues. They are, of course, aware that tests in which drawings were made in the psychic's presence are open to skepticism. "Where the experimenter arranged for the targets to be prepared by other people and presented at random," Weaver writes, "the possibility of Ossowiecki guessing the target by 'fishing' for information is also precluded" (p. 22). It is also stated that "it is inevitable that some giving away of clues, subjective validation and misreporting would have occurred at times" (p. 23). Selective reporting in informal experiments is also said to have been a potential problem. However, overall, the authors feel that the best tests cannot be explained by sensory cues and other conventional explanations.

In two later chapters the authors present the evidence for Ossowiecki's ESP from formal and informal experiments. Many of the reports discussed, particularly the formal tests, were translated from issues of the *Revue métapsychique* that appeared in the 1920s and were authored by such individuals as Prosper Szmurlo, Gustave Geley, Eugène Osty, and Stephen Chauvet. Some material published in English by Theodore Besterman is also included.

In one of these tests Geley gave Ossowiecki a sealed letter he got from Charles Richet, who was not present. Geley took notes as Ossowiecki spoke:

There is talk about a lady called Berger. It's a gentleman 50 years of age who wrote this letter, which is a reply to a letter from Prof. Richet. This letter does not come from Paris; it comes from a place near the sea. It's about various matters. It's an invitation. There is something about this lady called Berger. She is 33 years of age. She is married. I can't read this. It was written very quickly, it's confused, it digresses. It's a musical man who wrote it. (p. 28)

According to Geley, the only mistake was the statement of a place near the sea. The content of the letter consisted of an invitation to give lectures on behalf of various societies. It says "'you will be Mrs. Berger's guest of honor.' The letter includes the words '[written] in great haste.' It is very badly written and rather incoherent. The age and characteristics of Mr. and Mrs. Berger are correct" (p. 28).

Many other descriptions of tests present impressive performances by Ossowiecki. One of them is the famous test in which Eric Dingwall (1924) gave Albert F. von Schrenck-Notzing a sealed envelope with a phrase and a rough drawing of a bottle inside a rectangle. The drawing was successfully perceived in Dingwall's absence. Schrenck-Notzing did not open Dingwall's envelope and waited to discover the results until he was in front of the audience attending the Second International Congress of Psychical Research held at Warsaw in 1923. The successful result was received with applause from the audience. In fact, Dingwall (1924) stated in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* that: "M. Ossowiecki received an ovation and fell on the necks of the observers with tears in his eyes" (p. 263). Although Dingwall was convinced of the reality of the phenomenon at the time, it is said in the book (with no reference cited) that he later recanted (p. 65) and that he even considered the "complicity" of Schrenck-Notzing (p. 22). Interestingly, writing some years later, Schrenck-Notzing (1927/1972) mentioned in passing the issue of Dingwall's hypothetical complicity in this test, but he did not take such a possibility seriously.

Besterman's (1933) account of Ossowiecki's successful attempts to perceive the contents of a sealed drawing are interesting not only for the general success of the test but because of the way he presented Ossowiecki's mentation. Although this is not discussed in the book, I find Besterman's paper particularly interesting and valuable in that he numbered the statements made by Ossowiecki in a test done to perceive the contents of a sealed envelope. Besterman listed 41 separate statements, which I analyzed further. Ossowiecki produced 27 statements (that is, 66% of the mentation) before he started talking about the contents of the envelope. This illustrates Ossowiecki's occasional practice of describing images and impressions that were not about the target and that may indicate that his ability wandered on occasion before it focused on the desired target. However, although the content of this 66% of the mentation was not about the target, it was not without interest. Several points in the mentation refer to things related to the target, such as the surroundings in which the target was prepared and the persons present in those surroundings. From Besterman's list of the 27 items, one can see that he considered 15 (55%) as correct, 8 (30%) as incorrect, 3 (11%) as possibly correct but not possible to verify, and 1 (4%) as partly right and partly wrong. According to Besterman, 3 (20%) of the 15 correct items referred to things that Ossowiecki must have known about in advance. It would be interesting to see if an analysis of Ossowiecki's mentation taken from other tests would show the same pattern. More detailed studies of the phenomenology of the mentation would allow an assessment of both the frequency and nature of imagery types and modalities, associations, and symbolic representations.

In a chapter about "Answers and Questions," Barrington presents discussions of such issues as the source of Ossowiecki's ESP, including telepathy versus clairvoyance. She argues that "Ossowiecki came to know

what the targets were by a process analogous to rewinding a videotape of life, finding the scene where the target was prepared, and . . . taking a look at it, or a series of looks" (p. 138). The process was likely to produce "disorganized, fragmentary perceptions and odd details that might be picked up as an image comes and goes" (p. 138). Barrington further speculates that Ossowiecki was accessing some sort of memory record external to human beings.

The book closes with an afterword by Stevenson. To put Ossowiecki in context, he briefly discusses work done with other psychics. This overview will inform contemporary parapsychologists of aspects of the history of ESP research with which they should be more familiar. Stevenson covers such psychics as Alexis Didier, Ludwig Kahn, María Reyes de Zierold, Pascal Forthuny, and Rafael Schermann. He argues that Ossowiecki was investigated by more researchers than previous psychics and that he was "pre-eminent" in the introspective descriptions of his impressions.

Leaving aside the high price of the book and the low quality of the printed illustrations, the work reviewed here is an important contribution in a variety of ways. The authors have performed a good service in bringing Ossowiecki to the attention of modern readers. The details of the tests they present allow us to take a glimpse into psychical research as it was conducted in a different era, thus providing useful information about historical aspects of the field in Europe. Furthermore, the authors make a good case for taking the best of the research reports about Ossowiecki seriously as evidence for ESP. Weaver's biography of Ossowiecki, Stevenson's discussion of other psychics, and Barrington's overview of theoretical ideas and other aspects of Ossowiecki's ESP performance are all highly informative and thought-provoking.

In my view, however, the book could have paid more attention to historical context. More details about French "metapsychics" would have helped readers to understand better the brief statement that some researchers associated with the Institut Métapsychique International were not into the topic of survival of bodily death (p. 126). In addition, I wish the discussion of the concept of a memory record outside of human beings (p. 148) had included a more detailed consideration of the concept of Akashic records and of previous discussions of other ideas that assume the existence of collective memories or psychometric traces as repositories of memories.

Although other psychics are mentioned, there are few actual comparisons between Ossowiecki and other individuals. For example, both Elizabeth Denton (Denton & Denton, 1863) and Pascal Forthuny (Osty, 1926) received impressions on occasion in a cinematographic-like way, and this could have been compared to Ossowiecki's descriptions of his imagery. As for Ossowiecki's introspective accounts of the ESP process, White's (1964) analysis of the stages of the attention-focusing strategies and imagery involved in the ESP performance of gifted individuals would have provided material for valuable comparison.

The authors could also have discussed Ossowiecki's performances in relation to what has been learned from other studies. Did Ossowiecki present a different picture from that of later ESP findings or are his results consistent with what other researchers have learned? How do Ossowiecki's performances compare to those of less gifted individuals? Some suggested comparisons range from the work of René Warcollier (1938) to the more recent ganzfeld ESP studies that have paid attention to qualitative aspects of the mentation. In any case, discussions along these lines would have helped us to integrate better the research described in this book with modern developments.

These points, however, do not diminish the valuable contributions that Barrington, Stevenson, and Weaver have made in this book. Their volume is the best general discussion of Ossowiecki, superseding previous English language accounts by Geley (1924/1927, pp. 30-93) and Richet (n.d., pp. 147-162). I hope that in the future similar books combining biography with a selection of materials from the published literature will appear about other gifted individuals from the annals of psychical research. Mediums such as Leonora E. Piper, Eusapia Palladino, and Eileen J. Garrett are among those who deserve the type of deeper study the authors of this volume have provided us on Ossowiecki.

REFERENCES

- BESTERMAN, T. (1933). An experiment in "clairvoyance" with M. Stephan Ossowiecki. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, **41**, 345-351.
- DENTON, W., & DENTON, E. (1866). *The soul of things; or, psychometric researches and discoveries* (3rd rev ed.). Boston: Walker, Wise.
- DINGWALL, E.J. (1924). An experiment with the Polish medium Stephan Ossowiecki. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, **21**, 259-263.
- GELEY, G. (1927). *Clairvoyance and materialisation: A record of experiments* (S. de Brath, Trans.). London: T. Fisher Unwin. (Original work published 1924)
- OSTY, E. (1926). *Pascal Forthuny: Une faculté de connaissance supra-normale*. Paris: Félix Alcan.
- RICHT, C. (n.d., ca. 1929). *Our sixth sense* (F. Rothwell, Trans.). London: Rider. (Original work published ca. 1928)
- SCHRENCK-NOTZING, A.F. VON (1972). Problemas metodológicos del ocultismo [Methodological problems in occultism]. In A.F. von Schrenck-Notzing, *Problemas básicos de la parapsicología* [Basic problems of parapsychology] (G. Walther, Ed.). Buenos Aires: Troquel. (Original work published 1927)
- WARCOLLIER, R. (1938). *Experimental telepathy* (G. Murphy, Ed.; J.B. Gridley, and M.K. Murphy, Trans.). Boston: Boston Society for Psychic Research.

WHITE, R.A. (1964). A comparison of old and new methods of response to targets in ESP experiments. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 58, 21-56.

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

*Division of Perceptual Studies
Department of Psychiatric Medicine
University of Virginia Health System
P.O. Box 800152
Charlottesville, VA 22908
csa3m@virginia.edu*