

Eleonore Zugun (Talpa Poltergeist)

Eleonore Zugun (1913–1998), an adolescent Romanian girl, was the centre of an internationally known poltergeist-type episode in the 1920s. In addition to psychokinetic phenomena typical of such cases, she exhibited scratches, weals and bite-marks that appeared without any visible cause. The case was investigated over a two-year period by researchers in Austria, Germany and Britain.

Background

Eleonore Zugun was born on 24 May 1913 to a farming family in Talpa, a village in southern Romania.^[1]

An incident that occurred in February 1925, when she was aged eleven, is thought to have acted as a psychological trigger for the anomalous phenomena that followed. She and her cousins were on the way to visit her grandmother when she saw a coin in the road and picked it up, ignoring a warning by one of her companions that it was 'the Devil's money'. She then spent the money on sweets for herself, refusing to share. This angered her grandmother, who told her she had 'swallowed the Devil' and would never be free of him.

The next day, while the children were still with their grandmother, stones flew against the house and broke windows. Small objects near her shifted, jumped and flew. These phenomena repeated three days after her return to Talpa. The anxious family eventually placed Eleonore in a monastery, hoping for an exorcism of some sort, but the disturbances continued around her. They then sent her to a mental asylum for observation.

Investigations

A local newspaper report on the affair that appeared on 18 April 1925 came to the attention of a German spiritualist organization, which assigned Fritz Grunewald, an eminent German engineer and parapsychologist (though not himself a Spiritualist) to investigate. Grunewald managed to remove Eleonore from the asylum back to the monastery. He first met her on 9 May, observed the phenomena for the next few days, and published a short statement saying he was convinced they were genuinely paranormal. He died of a heart attack before he was able to write a full report, but his notes were posthumously published (see below, Phenomena).

When Eleonore was thirteen, she went to live in Vienna under the protection of Zoe, Countess Wassilko von Serecki. Wassilko was a Romanian-speaking Austrian aristocrat whose family, before the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, had held the lands on which Eleonore's family lived. Then aged 28, she had studied parapsychology and participated in investigative sittings with mediums for about six years, during which time she is credited with having skilfully exposed a person presenting fraudulent phenomena.^[2]

Wassilko first met Eleonore in September 1925 and was impressed by the phenomena she observed. A booklet by her on the early stages of the case essentially corroborated Grunewald's account.

In Vienna, Eleonore was subjected to further investigations, starting in January 1926. She then accompanied Wassilko on a five-month trip to England and Germany starting 26 September. During this time, Wassilko logged every anomalous incident she saw along with the names of witnesses. Austrian parapsychologist Peter Mulacz totalled the incidents recorded by Wassilko at 3,060, of which 884 were corroborated by others.^[3]

In the first phase of this investigative period, when Eleonore was in Vienna, some eighteen people were frequent witnesses, including those who shared the living quarters with Eleonore and Wassilko: Wassilko's parents, the maid, and a former governess. The rest were mostly visiting scientists. Another 25 people witnessed isolated incidents.

British paranormal investigator [Harry Price](#) observed Eleonora in Vienna on three separate days in April 1926, and again in September at his London laboratory, publishing detailed reports in British and American parapsychological journals.^[4] He went on to reference the case in best-selling books, making it one of international renown.

Carl Zimmer, a German zoologist, studied Eleonore in the laboratory of the Zoological Institute at Berlin University. Other investigators in Berlin included a committee of doctors. Investigations were also made in Munich directed by Albert Schrenck-Notzing, a influential German psychical researcher. No records of any of these can be traced;^[5] however, a film was made in Munich of some phenomena (see below, Skin Marks and Abrasions).

On 14 February 1927, aged thirteen, Eleonore had her first menstrual period. The phenomena now declined dramatically, and the final ones to be recorded occurred on 17 June. The following March she returned to Romania (see below).

Constitution and Personality

Wassilko described Eleonore as healthy, based on a doctor's examination (aside from an extreme skin sensitivity, which would prove relevant later); normal in terms of sleep and appetite; and intelligent, as evidenced by her reading and 'excellent' writing.^[6]

Price described Eleonore as

[i]nclined to be stubborn, rather intractable, occasionally sulky, very suspicious, and often has "moods". Eleonore is very intelligent for her age, is truthful, and will do anything for the Countess, whom she loves very much. Although thirteen years old, Eleonore is like a child of eight in many ways. She is incessantly playing with toys more suitable to a child half her years, and will spend the day amusing herself with squeaking animals, rubber balls, furry rabbits, etc. ... Eleonore seems fairly well educated for a girl in her position and her handwriting ... is good.^[7]

Phenomena

The phenomena witnessed in relation to Eleonore were

- rapping sounds
- spontaneous movements of objects, sometimes between rooms
- apports (small objects appearing and disappearing with no visible cause)
- bite marks, weals and abrasions on Eleonore's skin
- automatic writing

Raps

The raps were described as infrequent, occurring usually on the table, bed, or other furniture in Eleonore's immediate vicinity. Price described them as

similar to those heard so often with many mediums. No attempt has been made to extract information from, or to communicate with, any entity or personality assumed to be responsible for the phenomena; in fact it is not thought possible to do so by this means, as the raps are

purely spontaneous and cannot be induced by the methods usually employed.^[8]

Spontaneous Movements

Most of the early phenomena consisted of spontaneous movements of small objects and *apports*. As an example of unexplained movements, Johannes Maria Verweyen, a visiting German philosophy professor, observed several times that 'the books standing on the shelf, with their backs lined up like soldiers, were found moving forward, as if being pushed by an invisible hand (i.e., the ones smaller in size pushed in further)'. He reported seeing this several times, in conditions that he and Wassilko believed ruled out trickery.^[9]

Grunewald's posthumously published records include witness statements such as this by a local schoolmaster:

I decided to turn my gaze on a selected object ... I fixated [on] a water-jug which stood below the window on a big stool, and leaned obliquely against the wall. The jug was full of water. After about five minutes, I saw the jug raise slowly upwards about half a metre, after it had raised itself from its leaning position. Then it went in a slanting decline onto the other end of the stool, where it remained standing upright. Not a drop of water was spilled ...

All the people in the room saw this with their own eyes, so that it was impossible that one of us could have moved the jug with his hands.^[10]

Price, observing Eleanore with Wassilko, reported a series of anomalous events, at least some of which he was able to state positively could not have been caused by Eleanore. Small items disappeared, sometimes to return equally mysteriously, at other times never to be seen again. On such occasions, the apartment was searched from top to bottom, and Eleanore herself was searched.

Price describes one incident as follows:

At 5:43 ... when I had my eyes fixed on both the girl and the Countess, a steel stiletto, with handle, about ten inches long, used for opening letters, shot across the room, from behind me, and fell against the long-suffering door, already mentioned. I instantly turned round but there was nothing there. If I had been standing a little further to the right, the stiletto must have struck me. I am positively convinced that Eleonore was not normally responsible for the flight of the paper-knife and that no one was nearer to it than about twelve feet. I reiterate that Eleonore had both hands occupied ... and that I was actually watching the girl and the Countess when the paper-knife was projected.^[11]

A short while later the following incident occurred:

At 5:58 I saw a flash in front of me at the same moment as something dropped upon the top of the low bookcase. We at once investigated, and found that a small mirror ... had been thrown *over the partition from the bedroom side*. The usual position of the mirror is on a small table beside the Countess's bed. Again, I positively state that no one in the room could have projected the mirror across the partition. I of course immediately searched the bedroom portion and saw where the mirror had been reposing, but found nothing abnormal. I reviewed in my mind the various ways that the mirror could have been projected normally (such as wires, threads, spring releases, rubber bands, compressed air ... etc. etc.) but nothing was visible that could have caused any movement to the mirror.^[12]

Another incident:

To the right of me was a small table which had been moved for some purpose and my hostess

asked Eleonore to push it up close to the wall in its accustomed position. While I was watching the girl do this, and when both her hands were actually on the table in the act of moving it, we heard a terrific crash (6:23) on the other side of the partition. We three at once went into that portion of the room, and found that a large black cloth dog, fairly heavy, had been thrown from the study side of the room, over the partition and had fallen upon the raised handle of the coal-scuttle. It was the noise of the handle falling that had caused all the clatter. I am certain that the cloth toy in question was on a chair situated on the farther side of Eleonore. I had seen it there as we passed through the opening of the partition...^[13]

Price considered that from his position he ought to have seen the object in flight, as it was large and well within his line of vision. But, he states,

the Countess had previously impressed me that one did *not* see the flight of the projected objects. Also, the trajectory of the dog must have been a sharp curve – just as if it had been tossed over the partition; one can hardly assume that it went *through* the woodwork!^[14]

Price commented that phenomena occurred when Eleonore was the room or an adjoining one, also that they seemed stronger when she was in an angry mood. Both he and Wassilko observed that the phenomena correlated with increased appetite on Eleonore's part, and never happened while she was asleep.

Apports

In an incident reported by Grunewald:

8 phenomenon, 10.55 a.m. E. [Eleonore] sat quite still in front of Gru. [Grunewald] as previously, and he watched her. Something came from E.'s back, about 80 cm. above the table, and 20 cm. above her head. It went away toward her left (Gru.'s right), and dropped outside the table-edge to the floor, about 1 m. from E.'s left side (Gru.'s right). It was a little silver chain with a blue stone, a present from Klein which E. had in turn given to the cook. It must accordingly have come from the kitchen or the prior's house.^[15]

Grunewald noted the conditions: it was daylight, and the girl had been sitting still on a veranda.

Price wrote: 'Apports in the shape of ornaments, toys, etc., are transported considerable distances from one room to another. Locked doors seem no hindrance ... a brush, say, will be carefully put away in its proper place and ten minutes afterwards will drop from apparently nowhere into the midst of the Countess's family.'^[16] Wassilko stated, 'The affected object disappears, to appear suddenly and with a loud noise as of falling at another point, usually near the medium's head, without presenting any visible path of travel.'^[17]

In a later report, Wassilko described a clear observation of the apport phenomenon, which hitherto she had only encountered twice:

I had just gone into my room, and was looking out of the window, when a shadow slipped across and in through this, slowly and not in a straight line; then I heard a hard impact. I looked behind me, and found on the bed, a small snuff-box of thin metal, in which a set of small dominoes was kept. It was closed, yet one of the dominoes was spilled out on the bed.^[18]

On another occasion, she and Klein saw behind Eleonore

a dark, round, moving something, coming toward us. It grazed her left arm and fell upon the hassock beneath the table. It was a white Vaseline jar out of the bath cabinet. For this shadow-like, moving riddle I have hit upon the expression 'hole in the world' as most descriptive ... This

shadow has absolutely nothing in common with the aspect of a moving object, and in fact completely precedes the coming into visibility of the object ... I might cite the fact that the violence of its fall always corresponds exactly with the height at which the object, *as such*, is first fully visible. One cannot resist the impression that it is at this moment that the apported article first comes again under the dominion of the physical laws of our world.^[19]

Price noted the apport of a small coin, in which, unusually, its disappearance and appearance were independently recorded. A guest leaving Wassilko's apartment planned on his way out to tip the concierge with a silver shilling, the only coin he had on him at the time. The concierge was absent, however, so he put it back in his pocket. Travelling on the bus he felt for the coin to pay for his ticket but found it missing. Some ten minutes after his departure, when Eleonore and Wassilko were quietly sitting together, a silver shilling 'dropped from nowhere'. The coincidence was discovered some days later.^[20]

Skin Marks and Abrasions

A later development was the appearance of punctures and abrasions on Eleonore's skin, which appeared without any apparent agency. Wassilko wrote: 'Needles, which can subsequently be proved to be now missing from my work-box, stick themselves in the little girl's hands and face ... and no normal agency can be observed.'^[21]

Price describes Eleonore, while under his and Wassilko's observation, giving a cry of pain and pointing to a place on her arm or breast, where, her clothing having been lifted by Wassilko, a bite mark was found to have been made. As he and Wassilko watched, the mark gradually turned red, then white, then began to fade. Price mentions that he did not always have his eyes on Eleonore at these moments, allowing for the possibility that in some cases she could have made the marks herself. But she would have to have done so through the clothing, leaving marks and saliva, neither of which could be seen. Following least once instance, he stated, 'I did not see the slightest suspicious movement on the part of the girl to account for the teeth-marks.'^[22]

In later investigations, some of the bite marks on Eleonore's skin were found to be wet. She considered this to be 'Dracu's saliva'. Samples analysed by medical experts found that the micro-organisms contained in the moisture differed from those in her own saliva, but there were doubts that it was in fact saliva.

The documentary film made in Munich showed how even a delicate touch from another person could cause apparent abrasions and large welts on Eleonore's skin, also how anomalous scratches and bites could be provoked by her striking a drawing of Dracu with a hammer. The film can be viewed [here](#) (silent with German titles and Spanish subtitles).

Automatic Writing

When Wassilko asked Eleonore to try automatic writing, ostensible communications from 'Dracu' were received, sometimes promising to produce phenomena on a particular day (which sometimes would occur as promised, and sometimes would not).

Psychoanalysis

Wassilko was convinced that the psychokinetic phenomena had their roots in guilt feelings, a form of punishment that Eleonore inflicted on herself following the suggestion by her grandmother that she would be possessed by the Devil. Although untrained in psychoanalysis, Wassilko carried out sixty sessions with Eleonore between 17 May and 3 August 1926, the first time this was attempted in

such a case. Mulacz characterizes this activity as 'amateurish', but speculates that it had important effect, causing the phenomena to shift from the displacement of objects to physical assaults in the form of scratches and bites.

Theories

Mulacz has usefully summarized various theories with regard to the phenomena, in which correlations were sought between psychological and physical variables.^[23]

A graph made by Wassilko of the frequency of the phenomena for March 1926 shows a clear peak and ebb. From this, she anticipated that a correlation would be found between the phenomena and Eleanore's menstrual cycle. However, her later graphs did not bear this out.

Schrenck-Notzing hypothesized that the phenomena might correlate with moon phases, but this too is refuted by Wassilko's graphs.

Mulacz independently looked for correlations between Eleonore's phenomena and peaks of geomagnetic activity, following the work of [Michael Persinger](#), and local sidereal time following the work of [James Spottiswoode](#), but found no correlations.

Criticism and Controversy

The researchers were aware that Eleanore sometimes tried to fake phenomena when she thought she was not being closely observed. Wassilko logged such instances together with those that were clearly genuine.

Hans Rosenbusch, a German sceptic who had co-authored a book considered damaging to physical mediumship, invited Eleonore and Wassilko to visit his villa for testing, having reassured them that colleagues sympathetic to psychical research would be present.^[24] On their arrival they discovered that this was not the case, but nevertheless consented to stay. In fact, no sympathetic observers had been invited: Rosenbusch's intent seems to have been to stage an exposition of trickery, as he implicitly confirmed by publishing accusations in a newspaper against both Eleonore and Wassilko.^[25] These allegations were reviewed in 1979 by Gauld and Cornell, who concluded that there was little evidence to support them.

His notes are far from clear and his observations, when examined carefully, are ambiguous ... It is worth noting, as the Countess pointed out, that Rosenbusch has nothing to say about those occasions on which phenomena took place without any suspicious manoeuvres being observed by the attentive witnesses. He simply passes them by.^[26]

[Max Dessoir](#), a German philosopher and parapsychologist-turned-sceptic, claimed that Eleonore made the marks on herself with pointed fingernails and with the edge of a ring that he claimed he once saw her wearing. This is referenced by Paul Kurtz in *The Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology* (1985) in support of Kurtz's claim that the case was fraudulent.^[27] Mulacz has pointed out that Wassilko spoke of keeping the girl's nails short, also that this type of phenomena is recorded in the Munich film footage, where Eleanore is not wearing a ring.^[28]

Later Life

With Wassilko's encouragement, Eleonore trained as a hairdresser and manicurist in Vienna, then returned home after an absence of two years and two months. In subsequent letters to Wassilko, she recounted that she had a childless marriage with a Mr Gheorghiu and was later widowed. She also

mentioned a return of unspecified phenomena, which the Countess speculated might have been triggered by menopause.

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Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1.^ Mulacz (1999). All information in this article is drawn from this source except where otherwise noted. See also Mulacz (n.d.)
- 2.^ Price (1926), 449; Mulacz (1999), 23.
- 3.^ Mulacz (1999), 35.
- 4.^ Price (1926, 1927a, 1927b).
- 5.^ Mulacz (1999), 31.
- 6.^ Wassilko (1926a), 514.
- 7.^ Price (1926) 450.
- 8.^ Price (1926) 451.
- 9.^ Mulacz (1999), 27.

10. ^ Schroeder (1927), 20-21, cited in English by Mulacz (1999), 20-21.
11. ^ Price (1926), 460-61.
12. ^ Price (1926), 461-62.
13. ^ Price (1926), 463-64.
14. ^ Price (1926), 464.
15. ^ Schroeder (1927), 77-78, cited by Mulacz (1999), 21.
16. ^ Price (1926), 451.
17. ^ Wassilko (1926a), 515.
18. ^ Wassilko (1926b), 600.
19. ^ Wassilko (1926b), 600-601.
20. ^ Price (1926), 452.
21. ^ Wassilko (1926a), 515.
22. ^ Price (1926), 464.
23. ^ See Mulacz (1999), 38-40.
24. ^ This episode is described by Mulacz (1999), 30-32.
25. ^ Rosenbusch (1927).
26. ^ Gauld & Cornell (1979), 140.
27. ^ Kurtz (1985), 474.
28. ^ Mulacz (1999), 36.