

Garvarn's Blog



Printer friendly version of blogpost published at garvarn.blogspot.com • Comments included • Links are available in the online article

Olof Jönsson – the Swedish Swindler

Published Wednesday 30, July, 2008

The popularity of physical mediums and spiritualistic seances faded inexorably during the first decades of the 20th century. Most of the prominent psychics were exposed as fraudulent and as some of them confessed and revealed the methods used, business for those remaining wasn't exactly blooming. The reputations of researchers like Sir William Crookes, Charles Richet, Baron von Schrenck Notzing, Sir Oliver Lodge, Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Sir William Barrett, were unsparingly blemished when spiritualistic mediums they had once declared genuine now admitted to fraud or were exposed beyond doubt. (Edmunds, 1966; Hansel, 1989)

In 1934, Joseph Banks Rhine published *Extra-Sensory Perception*, in which he described very promising research on telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. It aroused huge interest among the lay public and the term "ESP" was suddenly on everyone's lips. But the critique was severe, and rightfully so; Rhine's experimental conditions were far from satisfactory (Hansel, 1989). Nevertheless, his work set the standard for modern parapsychology. And the people who claimed contact with the dead were not welcome. Although religiously inclined, Rhine left no laboratory door open for spiritualism. His research subjects were mainly university students. A special group of individuals did however emerge - the birth of modern parapsychology paved the way and introduced an academic label for a new breed of swindlers: "high-scoring subjects".

You have probably heard of some of the names. There was Ingo Swann who "remote viewed" the content of boxes by simply peeking into them when no one was looking (Randi, 1982). Bill Delmore made his way into the annals of parapsychology by doing parlour card tricks (Diaconis, 1978). Ted Serios produced "psychic" pictures by holding gadgets in front of camera lenses (Christopher, 1975; Diaconis, 1978). In the Soviet Union, Nina Kulagina was able to move objects by "psychokinesis", i.e. with the help of thin threads and magnets (Björkhem & Johnson, 1986). There

was of course Uri Geller, who managed to hoodwink hordes of parapsychologists and gullible scientists. He is probably the most exposed fraudster in history but there are still grown-ups, even on university payroll, who credit him with genuine psychic abilities. Not bad for a con artist.

These dexterous and unscrupulous attention-addicts were met by researchers who were gullible and presumptuous, to say the least, by experimental conditions that could be altered or overturned at whim, and by experimental analysis that demanded few successful deceptions to cause "statistical significance". But if the parapsychologists were clowns in the laboratory, they excelled in covering up. Diaconis notes that reports from ESP experiments "are often wholly inadequate" and offer poor record of what has actually taken place (Diaconis, 1978). When Barber suggested that parapsychological research very well could serve as a model to other fields of science regarding stringency and control (Johnson, 1980), it was on the basis of reports, not actual experiments.

Into this hodgepodge of deception, delusion and sloppy science entered a flamboyant Swedish psychic in the middle of the 20th century. His name was Olof Jönsson.

Most psychics create some sort of interesting background narrative to gloss over their often ordinary and banal descent. In Jönsson's case, the story is passed on by long time friend, Swedish literature professor Olle Holmberg (1968), and American writer Brad Steiger (1971), and it carries the standard elements of mindblowing miracles as everyday fun for the innocent psychic child. Jönsson, born in Malmö 1918, claimed that he started to experience strange things at the age of seven. At his parental home, he one day discovered, allegedly, that he could make a bottle fall from the table to the floor just by concentrating on it. According to Jönsson, he realized that he could affect lots of objects just by looking at them. He also claimed to have started to dream of events that later occurred and that he knew what people were thinking; he could answer questions before they were asked. In school, he didn't need to study because he dreamed up the answers the night before the tests. That no

one heard of those miracles when they were performed is astonishing...

One of his school teachers is said to have lulled Jönsson into Rosicrucianism. Later, when he was beginning his psychic career, Jönsson used to start his sessions with a lecture on the fundamentals of this branch of mysticism, but he soon gave that up since his audience had more taste for miracles than for ludicrous "wisdom".

Jönsson studied engineering and after a couple of odd jobs following his exam in 1941, he was employed as a draftsman at the Monark bicycle manufacturing company in Varberg 1946. By then, he had also dabbled a bit in healing together with a sidekick whose stutter Jönsson claimed to have cured. But it was during his time in Varberg that Jönsson's reputation as a miracle man started to spread. He soon became the pet psychic of a number of influential names in Swedish psychic research. Unfortunately, that doesn't say much since Swedish parapsychology has been, and still is, the playground of woo-woos with or without academic badges. Subsequently, the "experiments" with Jönsson, as described in Holmberg's, Steiger's and other's tributes, were in most cases carried out in the comfort of someone's home, during dinner, in the living-room, or at a restaurant, always in the company of friends and devotees. The feats reported is the standard routine for most mentalist entertainers; a lot of card tricks, identifying apparently random words in "never-before-seen books", and an occasional pulling of bottles with threads. Yes, that's right - Jönsson was performing parLOUR magic. But he, and his fans, called it "clairvoyance", "telepathy", "psychokinesis", and so on.

In 1949, the professor of telephony and telegraphy of the Royal Institute of Technology, Torben Laurent, conducted a series of experiments with Jönsson. Laurent was astonished but could not explain Jönsson's accomplishments with other than it had to be tricks. And again, as you read the "reports", the "experiments", although in an academical setting, are nothing but card tricks. Jönsson was allowed to do exactly what he was doing among friends in their homes; he had full control over the situation.

A couple of years ago, I made notes on several of Jönsson's most common effects. Now, when you describe a magic trick, you have to separate what is being performed by the magician from the effect it has on the audience. The most important psychological tool of the magician is misdirection, i.e. leading the audience to look somewhere else when the feat is executed. But the misdirection can also be in time, i.e. the presentation of a trick is done long after it has been executed.

The reports on Jönsson's effects are available en masse, but I wanted to find out how some of them could have been produced. I e-mailed a translated compilation of my notes to a very prominent British mentalist, who was kind enough to take the time to read and answer my letter. He admitted he had trouble identifying the exact tricks that would cause the described effects. But not because he didn't know how they had been produced, but because he couldn't decide which of many possible ways to produce the same effect had been used. Every effect, i.e. what the audience experience, often has a multitude of different ways to be accomplished. That is another very important tool of the magician. Never produce an effect the same way twice.

Indeed, when magicians were present during Jönsson's "experiments", they had no doubt about what he was doing. At one private dinner party, Erik Truxa and his wife were invited and when Jönsson demonstrated his "telepathy", Truxa immediately duplicated the trick, showing that all it took was some sleight-of-hand (Wikipedia.se, Truxa). Eric

Cubis was another magician who debunked Jönsson several times.

But the downfall of Jönsson in Sweden was his own doing. In the small village of Tjornarp in the south of Sweden, a murder occupied the police and the national press in November 1951. Mill owner Allan Nilsson was found dead in his bed after a fire had almost burned his house down. During the following investigation, the police soon suspected arson and in the autopsy, the cause of death was found to be severe battery. But the police had no leads and in desperation, one of the many psychics that had announced their interest in the matter was called in - Olof Jönsson.

Jönsson was confident and stated that he at anytime would be able to disclose who committed the crime, even if the murderer had made his way half around the world. With the help of objects belonging to the victim, Jönsson spent a day trying to "sense" the killer. He was assisted by local police officer Tore Hedin - seen here together with Jönsson who is "feeling" a rifle. The picture was published nationwide and confirmed Jönsson's reputation as a miracle man. But Jönsson was unable to come up with the name of the murderer and the crime remained unsolved for almost a year.



On the night of Friday 22 August 1952, local police officer Tore Hedin slew his sleeping parents with an axe in the village of Saxtorp. After having set the house on fire, he proceeded to Hurva village, and a home for old people where his former fiancée was working, and living. He crushed the back of her skull with the axe, in her sleep. The next victim was the manager, who received three blows to the head and died. Hedin dropped the axe, got two cans of gasoline from his car and set the house on fire. Four more people died in the flames.

Hedin wrote a suicide note and had some sausages in his car. Then he took a rowing-boat, went out on lake Bosarp, tied some weights to his body, jumped in the water, and drowned himself. He was found on Saturday. In his note, he admitted to having killed mill owner Allan Nilsson the year before. In the following investigation, it was discovered that Hedin had saved a clip with the picture of him and Jönsson during the arson investigation in 1951. The national headlines that followed cunningly mocked the psychic for apparently being too close to the perpetrator (Nilsson, 2008). Jönsson's reputation was wrecked and only the Swedish parapsychologists still had faith in him. With their help, he left for the United States in 1953 (Steiger, 1971).

In the us, Jönsson got rid of the dots over "o" to make it easier for Americans to pronounce his name. He moved to Chicago, where he found work with the help of an aunt. In Durham, J. B. Rhine had heard about the Swedish miracle man - although I doubt that the Swedish parapsychologists had informed him of Jönsson's assistance in the Hurva murder case or the many fraud exposures - and offered him to come down for testing. Jönsson willingly complied and of his accomplishments at the Rhine laboratories, there are several versions.

According to Jönsson (Steiger, 1971), Rhine considered him one of the most talented psychics he had ever tested. His results were so significant that Rhine even asked some research assistants to "adjust" the best ones because they were too good. And Jönsson told his fan club back in Sweden that he was performing well in controlled experiments (SM, 1998). The "tests" he bragged about were those conducted at night, during a stop with the car on a road, or in someone's home (Steiger, 1971) - conditions very far from

those prescribed by Rhine as necessary when verifying parapsychological hypotheses (Rhine & Pratt, 1974).

Rhine, on the other hand, had a slightly different version. The testing of Jönsson was terminated because he never managed to produce anything convincing. In fact, Rhine noted that Jönsson's performances diminished as controls increased. At an important presentation for a group of scientists, Rhine even caught Jönsson red-handed, when he was about to cheat. Rhine whispered to him:

- Ollie, stop that at once!

Jönsson blushed, embarrassed, and failed miserably with the test. Rhine had also figured out how Jönsson did some of his other "telepathy" card feats. (Semitjov, 1979)

Holmberg (1968) notes that both he and Jönsson overestimated the support Jönsson would get from American researchers, so I guess it is safe to conclude that Rhine's version is closer to the truth. But, in fairness, there are some parapsychologists in the States that were completely taken in by Jönsson. Norman Don, for instance, illustrates how completely deluded you can be and still hold an academic title. Although Jönsson died in 1998, Don corresponded with him as late as 2001 (Harrell, 2001). There is also William Cox who readily acknowledged that Jönsson was a fraud but still considered him a "sensitive" (Cox, 1974). Yes, the same Cox who, at the 1976 Parapsychological Association convention in Utrecht, declared that magician Ulf Mörling, who was demonstrating how paranormal phenomena could be accomplished with trickery, was a genuine psychic without knowing it (Johnson, 1980).

Jönsson's next big escapade was the telepathy experiment during Apollo 14's space trip in 1971. In short, four psychics on earth were supposed to receive telepathic signals from astronaut Edgar Mitchell in space. The tests failed miserably, of course. In fact, Jönsson's results were so bad the para-psychologists decided it was supernaturally bad, so-called psi-missing (Randi, 1982). Jönsson even "received" during a day when Mitchell had to cancel "sending" due to other commitments (Semitjov, 1979). What is interesting about this experiment, though, is Jönsson's stunt with the press. NASA had decided that the test, which was Mitchell's private project, should be conducted in secret and it was stipulated that the names of the four psychics not were to be disclosed, they were only to be referred to as A, B, C, and D. But days before Apollo 14 landed, someone leaked to the press and the experiment made big headlines. Only one of the psychics was named. Olof Jönsson. He was psychic A. None of the other psychics have ever been disclosed. According to Mitchell, the leak was Jönsson (Backstrom, 2001). He simply couldn't restrain himself from seizing this opportunity to personal fame and glory.

One of many outrageous psychic accomplishments Jönsson claimed was helping adventurer Mel Fisher to find a Spanish galleon with \$300,000 (or sometimes \$140 million) worth of gold in July 1974. The site of the wreck was outside Florida Keys and Jönsson was allegedly able to direct the search team to the spot where the treasure was found (Semitjov, 1979). But no one at Fisher's company – it is still in business, or at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum, has any recollection of any such assistance or knowledge of a man by the name of "Olof Jönsson" – and some of the people now (or when I contacted them a couple of years ago) working for the company did so back in 1974. In fact, no galleon was even found that year, no major discoveries at all were made. The famous gold treasure and pieces of a ship found in 1985 was the result of a long-time search effort with findings of scattered pieces preceding it. And Olof Jönsson had nothing to do with it, although he may have claimed that too.

The stories about Jönsson led Philippine president Fer-

dinand Marcos, a certified woo-woo with psychic aspirations of his own, to hire the Swede for a World War II treasure hunt, the gold cargo of a sunken Japanese heavy cruiser, the Nachi. Jönsson's reward, if he found anything, was to be more than generous. This time, Jönsson was sort of lucky. The location was already marked on a map. When a first dive failed, Jönsson insisted that they should try some hundred yards away. Ka-ching, there was the Nachi! Jönsson had actually found war loot using his psychic powers! And a map marked with the location of the wreck... (Seagrave & Seagrave, 2003)

In closing, perhaps Olof Jönsson's obituary in the Chicago Tribune may serve as a proper summary of his life as a psychic. I quote:

"Yet Mr. Jonsson did establish an international reputation as a psychic as a young man growing up in his native Sweden. After a small town in Sweden had a series of bizarre murders in which 12 women were brutally slain, police authorities contacted Mr. Jonsson, who had a detailed vision of the crimes and the murderer. After Mr. Jonsson identified the suspect as a young policeman, the officer confessed the crimes in a suicide note. Mr. Jonsson later told the Tribune that the situation disturbed and depressed him, and he swore to never again get involved in solving violent crimes." (McSherry Breslin, 1998)

Remember Jönsson's complete failure in finding the Hurva murderer, police man Tore Hedin? Well, in the US, Jönsson converted that to a success. He didn't even bother to keep track of essential details, such as the number or gender of the victims, or the fact that Hedin only had slain one person at the time when Jönsson was involved in the investigation. He sometimes counted the victims to thirteen, and claimed that Hedin made a note in his suicide letter that it only was a matter of time until Jönsson would identify him (Semitjov, 1979). No journalist ever bothered to check Jönsson's stories...

Olof Jönsson was a simple trickster, with an amazing career. Next to Uri Geller, he may very well be the swindler that managed to cheat the largest number of parapsychologists ever. Then again, anyone can call him- or herself a parapsychologist. And if you take an interest in these matters called "paranormal", you will soon find that anyone does.

References

- Backstrom, F. (2001). Private lunar ESP: An interview with Edgar Mitchell. In *Cabinet Magazine*, 5. [web document] <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/esp.php>
- Björkhem, Ö., & Johnson, M. (1986). *Parapsykologi och övertro*. Stockholm: Forum
- Christopher, M. (1975). *Mediums, mystics & the occult*. New York: Crowell
- Cox, W. E. (1974). Parapsychology and magicians. In *Parapsychology Review*, May-June, pp. 12-14.
- Diaconis, P. (1978). Statistical problems in ESP research. In *Science*, 201, (14).
- Edmunds, S. (1966). *Spiritualism. A critical survey*. London: Aquarian Press
- Hansel, C.E.M. (1989). *The search for psychic power. ESP & parapsychology revisited*. New York: Prometheus
- Harrell, M.A. (2001). *Condition Three*. [web document] <http://www.marharrell.com/Pages/NDon01.html>
- Holmberg, O. (1968). *Den osannolika verkligbeten*. Stockholm: Bonniers
- Johnson, M. (1980). *Parapsykologi*. Zindermans
- McSherry Breslin, M. (1998). Olof Jonsson obituary. In *Chicago Tribune*, quoted in [web document] http://paranormal.se/topic/olof_jonsson.html

- Nilsson, K. (2008). Polis – och mördare. Tore Hedin utredde sina egna mord. In *Aftonbladet*, 9 July.
- Randi, J. (1982). *Film-Flam. Psychics, ESP, unicorns and other delusions*. New York: Prometheus
- Rhine, J. B., & Pratt, J. G. (1974). *Parapsychology: Frontier science of the mind* (5th printing). Springfield: Charles C. Thomas
- Seagrave, S., & Seagrave, P. (2003). *Gold warriors: America's secret recovery of Yamashita's gold*. Verso.
- Semitjov, E. (1979). *Mellan dröm och verklighet*. Askild & Kärnekull
- Steiger, B., (1971). *Fallet Olle Jönsson. Ockulta fenomen – parapsykologiska experiment*. Zindermans. (Am: *The Psychic Feats of Olof Jönsson*, Prentice-Hall)
- SM, (1998). The laws of nature were put out of play. Conversations with Sune Stigsjö. In *Sokaren*. [web document] <http://www.sokaren.se/INDEX98.HTML>
- Wikipedia.se, article Truxa, [web document] <http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truxa>

Comments:

calle555 said...

I similar, more recent failiure by another Swedish medium:

At a private initiative spiritual medium Jill Petersson, known from the Swedish version of *Sensing Murder* ("Förnimmelse av mord"), is brought to Äppelbo. Crying and shaking she stands at the edge of the small lake where she claims the body of Marie is. At the same time she puts her arm around Jan-Erik Brandt and proclaims that she can "feel" him not having anything to do with the disappearance.

The body was found buried outside the couple's house. Jan-Erik was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Source (in Swedish): <http://www.dt.se/nyheter/article45143.ece>

Related articles från *Dalarnas Tidningar*:

Tv-medium deltar i sökandet efter Marie

Nya dykningar efter Marie

Återtar erkännande

This is a translation of one of my posts at VoF's Forum.

August 1, 2008 4:51 PM

devadatta said...

The Apollo experiment was mentioned in one chapter in the book *Det okända* by Clas Svahn. It was an interview with a swedish parapsychologist (not a psychic) who may have controlled the results in the test. Could anyone check up his name?

August 5, 2008 7:58 PM

Garvarn said...

Devadatta, are you perhaps thinking of Eugen Semitjov, the Swedish journalist who is said to have reviewed the data with both Jonsson and Mitchell? Svahn makes a comment about it on page 160 in *Det okända*. But I don't think Semitjov referred to himself as a "parapsychologist". And I don't think reviews under the supervision of Mitchell or Jonsson amount to anything, considering how the experiment has been interpreted by the more optimistic commentators over the years.

August 5, 2008 8:21 PM

jjerkert said...

Very interesting and very well-written, Garvarn! This text should be available in Swedish, too. (You can probably guess to which magazine I think you should submit a Swedish version.)

August 8, 2008 3:39 PM

Garvarn said...

Thanks jjerkert, our contemporary psychics are nothing compared to Jonsson, so perhaps a Swedish version is desirable.

August 8, 2008 5:03 PM

devadatta said...

No, it was a Swedish parapsychologist with a common Swedish name as I remember it. He was interviewed by Clas Svahn. In the interview he mentioned that his choice of career was inspired by an astronomer (also Swedish) who believed in the paranormal. He mentioned the Apollo experiment as well but I don't recall in exactly what context.

It's a shame I don't have the book myself to check it up.

August 9, 2008 5:13 AM

Garvarn said...

Oh, you must be thinking of Martin Johnson, interviewed on pages 51-62. But he makes no reference to the Apollo 14 experiment and is not mentioned in the Mitchell chapter. Are you confusing Johnson with Semitjov, perhaps?

August 9, 2008 12:36 PM

devadatta said...

Ah, yes, my fault. I must have confused them. And yet I remember it so clearly. I'll take it as a lesson of the fragility of memory.

Thanks for the name anyway.

August 11, 2008 3:36 AM