Spiritualism in Finland had a precursor in Swedenborgianism. The famous Swedish mystic, theologian, and natural scientist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) has been seen as one of the forerunners of Spiritualism. Some writings of Emanuel Swedenborg have been available in Finland at least since the mid-nineteenth century. But it was as late as in 1900 that the first book by Swedenborg was translated into Finnish. During the early twentieth century, Swedenborg was mentioned quite frequently in the Finnish newspapers. Swedenborg’s purported ability to converse with spirits, his journeys to other planets, and his descriptions of heaven and hell became well-known in Finland. Finnish scholars Tiina Mahlamäki and Tomas Mansikka have suggested that Swedenborg’s ideas influenced the Finnish cultural and spiritual milieu during the nineteenth century was considerable (Mahlamäki & Mansikka 2013: 300–307).

Spiritualism in the strict sense of the word arrived in Finland at the turn of the twentieth century, a time when other alternatives to the dominant Evangelical Lutheran Church, such as Theosophy, also gained a foothold in the country. It is known that some English mediums visited Finland at this time. In 1908 the famous English medium Alfred Vouis held eight Spiritualist séances in Helsinki. This may have provided the inspiration for founding the first Finnish Spiritualist magazine, Spiritualisti (The Spiritualist). Soon thereafter, in 1909, local Spiritualist societies were founded in Helsinki and Tampere. Articles in the magazine indicate that Theosophical ideas aroused interest also among Finnish Spiritualists (Hjelt 2012).

Closely related to Spiritualism is the scholarly (or semi-scholarly) interest in parapsychology, also introduced in Finland at this time. A Swedish-speaking society for studying parapsychological phenomena, Sällskapet för psykisk forskning (Society for Psychic Research), was founded in 1907. Especially in its early phase, the society had a special interest in Spiritualist phenomena. One prominent member, Professor of Philosophy Arvi Grotenfelt (1863–1941), was one of the few academics who tried to establish the scientific study of parapsychology. Grotenfelt himself had a critical (but open) attitude towards Spiritualist and supranormal phenomena.
A similar Finnish-language organisation, Suomen parapsykologinen tutkimusseura ry (Parapsychological Research Society of Finland), was founded in 1938 and officially registered in 1943 (the abbreviation ry stands for registered association). In the 1950s, the society decided to conduct empirical parapsychological research, along lines similar to those of the parapsychological research programme that had been conducted at Duke University already during the 1930s. In the 1960s, the Finnish society shifted away from academic issues and focused increasingly on spirituality and metaphysics (Aho 1993: 15–26, 101–105, 125–132).

The Post-War Years

After the Second World War, interest in Spiritualism increased. An organisation with Spiritualist aims, Suomen Spiritualistinen Seura ry (The Spiritualist Association of Finland) was founded in 1946 (and registered in 1948) in Helsinki. The association joined the International Spiritualist Federation (IFS) in 1948. Several individuals played key roles in promoting Spiritualism in Finland in these post-War years. The first chairman of the society, Helmi Krohn (1871–1967), had a significant role in disseminating, translating, and writing Spiritualist literature. Gerda Ryti (1886–1984), the wife of President Risto Ryti, supported the translation of Spiritualist books into Finnish (Religions in Finland database 2014). Under the leadership in the period 1971 to 1985 of Maire Kiira (1922–2009), chairman of the Finnish Spiritualist association and board member of IFS, the Finnish Spiritualist movement gained more members than ever before (Suomen Spiritualistinen Seura ry 2014). Finally, mention should be made of Svea Richnau (1922–2007), who was a founding member of the Swedish Spiritualist society in Finland in 1951. Finnish journalist and author Oskar Reponen wrote her biography in 1977, a book that was widely read and gained a lot of publicity for the Spiritualist movement (Suomen Spiritualistinen Seura ry 2014).

In 1988, local groups of Suomen Spiritualistinen Seura ry began to function as separate local entities called Spiritual Growth associations. At the time of writing (2014), Suomen Spiritualistinen Seura ry has 1545 members and nine local associations. The Association promotes seven basic tenets that British medium Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) claimed to have received from the spirit world in 1871. These seven tenets are formulated in the following way by the Association: