Spiritualism in Sweden

Robert Carleson* and Caroline Levander**

Precursors

Long before there was a spiritualist movement, in the mid- to late nineteenth century, there were visionaries in Sweden who suggested that they could see spirits. The person who without any doubt has most decisively influenced this tradition in Sweden up to our own time was Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). The son of Bishop Jesper Svedberg, Swedenborg pursued a widely acknowledged scientific career until the 1740s. For the remaining years of his life, he explored the spirit world in visionary states, and worked out the details of the correspondences that he maintained existed between the world of the spirits and our own (see the chapter on Swedenborgianism in Scandinavia).

In the 1770s, Duke Charles (later to become King Charles XIII) gathered around himself a circle of esotericists, who met at the royal castle. The principal members of this circle were the spirit visionaries Karl Anders Plommenfelt (b. 1750, died at an unknown date in America), Gustav Björnram (ca. 1745–1801), and Henrik Gustaf Ulfvenklou (1756–1819). In this circle, the first spirit séances in Sweden were held.

By the end of the 1780s, the theories of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) concerning animal magnetism were introduced, after Baron Carl Göran Silfverhielm (1759–1808) had received instruction in the practice in Paris. In 1786 the teachings of Swedenborg and Mesmer were united in the practices of Exegetiska och Philantropiska Sällskapet (The Exegetic and Philanthropic Society), a fact that made a form of proto-spiritualist somnambulism known to a wider audience (see Mesmerism in Sweden in the present volume).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, interest in similar hypnotic and purportedly paranormal phenomena had spread to representatives of the medical profession, and considerable interest was shown in the Danish magnetic medium Carl Hansen, who in the 1860s demonstrated his abilities to the medical societies of Uppsala and Stockholm.
The Formative Years of Spiritualism

An international spiritualist movement properly speaking arose in the wake of the 1848 “spirit rappings” in Hydesville. This budding spiritualist movement is the topic of a Swedish thirty-page tract written in 1853 by the pseudonym “en f.d. twiflare” (an ex-doubter). The text mainly deals with physical phenomena such as turning tables and rapping sounds caused by spirits. Nine years later, a brief Swedish-language summary of the doctrines of the French spiritist Allan Kardec was published. Spiritualism became widely known in 1858, after being described in positive terms by a well-known author, Viktor Rydberg (1828–1895). Rydberg also published a poem that he had received by paranormal means from the spirit of the deceased French songwriter Pierre Jean de Béranger.

The seeds of a local, Swedish spiritualist movement were sown around 1872, when the director of the Hamburg mail service, Johan Carl Hellberg (1815–1877), travelled around Sweden and lectured on the subject. The first spiritualist organisation was established in Hellberg’s home on 4 February 1877, under the name Spiritistiska Lånebiblioteket (The Spiritualist Library). Other board members were the lecturer in geology (later Professor, doctor honoris causa at Uppsala University, and chair of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences) Alfred Elis Törnebohm (1838–1919), the music editor Johan Albert Schildknecht (1833–1919), and L. Schubert and C.G. Lindmarck. The purpose of the organisation was to conduct research and hold séances. After three years, a sizeable library of spiritualist literature, Swedish as well as foreign, had been accumulated, and the organisation changed its name to Spiritistiska Litteraturföreningen (SLF), i.e., the Spiritualist Literary Association.

The earliest known regular séances were held in 1885, at the home of dentist A. Dahlin. The chairman of the organisation was at this time colonel Erik Gustav Klingenstierna. The organisation had by now been divided into different sections with approximately ten members in each. The medium presiding at most of the séances was the artist Bertha Valerius (1824–1895).

During this period, it was quite inopportune for scientists with established careers to be publicly associated with spiritualism. Memberships were therefore kept secret, and new members were only accepted after a careful screening process. Séances were held in private homes, and the rules of the organisation even stipulated that séances were not to be held, and that the main purpose of the society was studying texts and arranging public lectures. The organisation was disbanded as late as 1984.