



NOTES ON A STRANGE WORLD] MASSIMO POLIDORO

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A Telepathy Investigation

A local Italian newspaper, *La Nuova Provincia di Biella*, published an article titled “Mother and Daughter of Zubiena Communicate Through the Power of Thought.” It reported a telepathic link that seems to exist between Carmela Paola and her daughter Amalia Maruca, both of Zubiena, a small town in the province of Biella. It’s a link that was allegedly proven through the use of Zener cards. According to the newspaper, the two women have an accuracy that varies between 90 percent and 100 percent. Each one almost always guesses the symbol (circle, cross, waves, square, or star) the other is thinking of—an experience that, if confirmed, would represent the first case in the world of documentable telepathy. It would be an exceptional discovery, as well as the opportunity to bring home numerous prizes offered around the world to those who could first demonstrate any skill of this kind.

‘This Case Has Really Struck Me’

The case, of course, attracted the attention of CICAP, the Italian skeptics committee. I got in touch with Alberto Serena of the Biella association NuovaMente (NewMind). It is he, in fact, who discovered the talent of the two women by subjecting them to tests with a deck of Zener cards (cards that appear to be those that were attached to one of my first books: *Are You*

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Psychic?, published in 1997!).

When he talks about Carmela and Amalia, Serena cannot hide his enthusiasm. “We have done all the necessary checks to avoid fraudulent tricks [*sic*] or similar things, also involving the experts of those associations born specifically to refute such facts,” he says in the interview for the *La Nuova Provincia di Biella*. “And we could not find any anomaly: mother and daughter can communicate with the force of the mind with such extraordinary results. Personally I have been following these phenomena for about 30 years and I am not easily impressed but I have to say that this case has really struck me.” Serena was happy to let us meet the two women and have them show us their skills.



Massimo Polidoro and Luigi Garlaschelli look over the mother and daughter during a preliminary test where they could see each other.



The “transmitter” takes note of the cards seen before transmitting them.

An Almost Perfect Success!

On September 22, 2016, my colleague Luigi Garlaschelli and I went to Biella, where we met the two women at NuovaMente. We were immediately struck by their desire not to seek publicity. They agreed to meet us because Serena had insisted, but after newspapers had talked about them they refused several invitations to appear on national television programs.

We asked the two women to give us a demonstration of what they can do and left them free to prepare and conduct the experiment themselves, as they usually do, without any interference from us. Carmela and Amalia took their seats on opposite sides of a table. One of them looked and tried to “transmit” the symbols of a previously mixed Zener deck one card at a time. On the other side sat the one who must try to receive the symbol thought by the other. A small screen about thirty inches high separated the two women, covering the

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cards from sight but allowing the two women to look at each other.

During the procedure, the one who transmits the thought-of card marks on a sheet of paper the symbol transmitted; immediately afterward, the one who receives it marks the symbol received on a similar sheet. The first test under these conditions led to an almost perfect

result: twenty-four cards (out of twenty-five) correctly guessed very quickly.

A Screen—and Disappearing Results

To eliminate the possibility of signals, even involuntary ones, we suggested the use of a higher screen, which prevents the two women from looking at each other. It is something that they had already done and that they agreed to repeat, while explaining that under these conditions their possibility of “coming into contact” diminishes, and, as a consequence, they warned us that their successes will probably also drop.

Indeed, this time only seven out of twenty-five cards were guessed right. It was a little above a chance result, but there are also those, such as magician Simone Ravenda, who have noticed in the past that under these conditions some sounds are frequently heard, such as the squeaking of the chair, movements, breaths, coughs, etc.

A pen writing on the surface of paper (when the transmitter writes down the symbol to be sent) produces different—and easily distinguishable—noises for each symbol drawn. The symbol of a circle produces a single sound, the cross two sounds, the wavy lines three, the square four, and the star five. It is clear that if you hear three or more sounds being drawn you will not draw a circle, even if it is the target that came to mind first.

“Sound reading,” as this technique is called, is a classic trick of mentalists who wish to simulate telepathy phenomena. To eliminate this possibility, therefore, we gave the woman who transmits a tablet upon which with a finger she could silently draw the symbol. Under these conditions the result was five cards guessed out of twenty-five—exactly what one would expect by chance.



A series of images of both mother and daughter that show their constant, possibly involuntary, grimacing and signaling.

Non-Zener, Non-Transmission

The two women then explained that not being seen prevents them from communicating effectively. We agreed to again use the low screen, but this time we suggested the use of a different deck of cards, on which the five Zener symbols are no longer present; instead, some famous optical illusions are reproduced.

We chose twenty-five at random. After ten attempts, however, the women asked us to stop because they said they could not transmit anything. The drawings made by the receiver, in fact, did not resemble those transmitted, not even when they tried to find arbitrary correspondences in some details. So we tried with a normal deck of fifty-two playing cards, selecting twenty-five at random. This time the cards were correctly guessed twice, and there were also nine occasions in which the suit was guessed but not the number, and two in which the number was guessed correctly but not the suit.

At this point we stopped because, after more than two and a half hours of testing, Carmela and Amalia were understandably tired. However, there did not seem to be any possibility for future verification because the women told us, after our meeting, that they would no longer be interested in giving other demonstrations to anyone. A week later, however, they were again in public at the Università Popolare di Biella, where Serena introduced them before a new demonstration of their “telepathic” ability was given, also mentioning the presence of CICAP during the previous days.

The (Involuntary) Signals

One conclusion that we drew from these exploratory tests is that if telepa-

thy is at play, then it must be very weak, since it only works with Zener cards, while it is absent when using other types of images or cards. Moreover, the real nature of this skill is strongly questioned by the fact that it disappears when the two women cannot look at each other. It is something that they themselves admit: “This kind of

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understanding is so natural to us,” they said in an interview with *La Stampa* on August 10, “all this attention to us is also very surprising. There are no tricks, but surely we understand each other with looks. It always happens.”

During the tests in which mother and daughter could be observed, occasions were continuously noticed and photographed in which one or the other produced different types of body and facial movements, small or large;

movements of the hands, of the shoulders, of the head, of the eyes, contracting the lips, serious expressions, smiles, movements of the nose, of the eyebrows, of the chin, and so on. They were not much different from what is usually done by those who play cards in pairs and try to silently signal to the partner the cards that one has in his hand. It is possible that these movements are involuntary, but the fact remains that when they are hidden from view (and other communication possibilities, such as sound, are prevented) the results drop to pure chance.

Agreement Yes, Telepathy No

Our conclusion is that Carmela and Amalia undoubtedly have a strong bond and—as they often say—manage to understand each other immediately with a glance, just as we have observed. However, it is possible that their close familiarity will, during the tests, lead them to make facial expressions that, in the past, they had seen work well during “transmission” of a very limited number of images.

Not surprisingly, when the experiment with a deck of cards that presented symbols different from those of the Zener cards was attempted, either no results of any kind were obtained (as with the cards of optical illusions that were unknown to the two women) or when using normal poker cards, occasional positive results were obtained using only the four suits of hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds. If telepathy was really at play, it should be possible to transmit other information in addition to the five Zener symbols. In our opinion Carmela and Amalia certainly possess a talent for making the other person understand the figure each is thinking about, but that’s not telepathy. ■

