



Massimo Polidoro is an investigator of the paranormal, lecturer, and co-founder and head of CICAP, the Italian skeptics group. His website is at www.massimopolidoro.com.

Magic or Miracle? A Lesson Worth Remembering

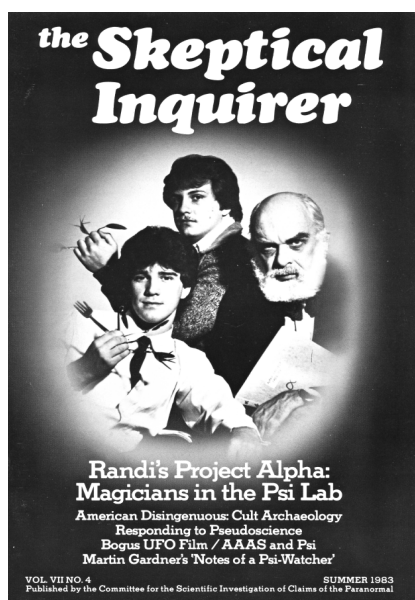
Fourteen years ago, I was astonished to read a brief article in the January 1997 (vol. 61, no. 846) *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSR)* written by parapsychologist Alexander Imich, a retired chemist and president of the Anomalous Phenomena Research Center in New York. His article, titled “Joe A. Nuzum, A Little-Known Psychic,” describes Nuzum as being “of the D.D. Home¹ class.” The article consisted of a long list of miracles that Nuzum appeared to have performed over the years. However, my astonishment was due not to the impressiveness of the list but rather to the following facts: 1) the conditions under which these presumed miracles took place were not described in the article; 2) all of the “phenomena” described belonged to the classic conjurers’ and fakirs’ repertoire; 3) it appeared that no magician was ever present at any of Nuzum’s demonstrations; and 4) there was no reference to the fact that Nuzum himself was a magician.

Banachek and Project Alpha

Today Nuzum, though still claiming on his website to have “mastered many mind-over-matter studies,” runs a magic shop in Pennsylvania. I contacted mentalist and friend Banachek who, under his real name of Steve Shaw, was one of the celebrated alumni of Project Alpha (in which young magicians



Steve “Banachek” Shaw



Project Alpha magicians Steve Shaw (with fork), Michael Edwards, and James Randi were featured on the cover of the Summer 1983 SI.

fooled scientists into thinking they had extrasensory perception [ESP]). Steve confirmed to me that he was a friend of Nuzum at the time of Project Alpha. They lived in the same town, had been friends for at least five years, and used to exchange tricks and ideas on magic. However, it appears that Nuzum—who had specialized in escapology at the time—was impressed by the press coverage that Steve had been able to gather while pretending to be a psychic, and he wanted to achieve the same result.

Nuzum started to perform mentalism tricks, most of which were pretty standard purchased items, and with these he convinced psychiatrist Berthold Schwartz that he was the real thing.

Schwartz had already been “amazed” by Steve during Project Alpha, and he continued to believe that Steve really had psychic powers even after the hoax was revealed. When Steve tried to explain to him via letters that Nuzum was a colleague and was just performing conjuring tricks, Schwartz refused to listen.

Steve told me:

There is a big difference between what Joe Nuzum is doing and what I did. My fiasco was an experiment. For years parapsychologists had lamented that the only reason there was no scientifically documented evidence under proper scientific controls was because of the lack of proper funding to perform such controls. We had countered and believed that this was not the case and the lack of such docu-

“In retrospect I should have known that Joe [Nuzum] would have had no problem using people for his own benefit.”
—Steve Shaw

mentation lay in the parapsychologists’ pro-biased beliefs when they entered such experiments. MacDonald Douglass gave a half a million dollars to study . . . Psychokinetic Metal Bending, PKMB, to Washington University. Here was our chance to prove our point.

I went in not to take advantage, not to gain anything, not to take money, trips and vacations (unlike Joe), but simply to prove a valid point. I went in knowing full well that I was going to expose the fraud I was perpetrating. It became very hard at times. These were good people, with good hearts, who became my friends. It was very hard knowing I was going to have to hurt these people who had become a personal part of my life. Had I known they would mean so much to me, maybe I would have done things a little different, I certainly would have kept my distance emotionally.

On the other hand, I should have read the signs in Joe Nuzum. I should have known that he certainly would not have cared about hurting other people or lying to them; in retrospect I should have known that Joe would have had no problem using people for his own benefit.

Project Alpha was designed to show how competent magicians can complete the same tasks as self-proclaimed psychics. It appears, however, that some experts still don’t believe the phenomena aren’t genuine.

A “Challenge” Met

Because my comments (along with those of James Randi) were published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, Imich decided to give us a

reply (*JSPR* 61[848], July 1997). However, his words regarding our doubts, I regret to say, were quite disappointing. As usually happens in such cases, our real question was avoided.

As Randi and I had pointed out in our letters, the fact that the effects presented by Nuzum looked as if they were taken directly from a magic catalog should have raised flags. We did not insist, as Imich implied, that Nuzum’s effects were *necessarily* done by trickery. But they at least *may* have been done in such a way. What is the real question, then? Given the highly suspect nature of Nuzum’s demonstrations, it was for Imich of the utmost importance to ascertain that they were not the result of trickery. The only way to do this was to ask a competent magician to participate in the tests. Randi, Steve, or I would have loved to attend such demonstrations, but the suggestion was ignored.

Surprisingly, however, Imich wrote:

The crusaders against the paranormal usually do not tackle difficult cases. They prefer to deal with events easier to criticize. Mr. Randi, too, does not mention the “*Gray’s Anatomy* case,” an event out of the range of magical technique and much more difficult to discredit. I have challenged Mr. Polidoro to repeat this event, but I am not sure if he himself is a magician.

Aside from the fact that this was the first time I had heard of such a “challenge” (and the fact that Imich did not appear to have any qualification to judge whether an event is “out of the range of magical technique” or not), what most surprised me about this ac-

cusation was that in my letter I suggested a possible explanation for just one of the effects described by Imich, the “*Gray’s Anatomy* case”!

I wrote, in fact:

Mr Imich, for example, describes an effect by Nuzum he witnessed, in which the corner of a selected page of a book appeared inside an envelope. A simple suggestion: Mr Imich could invite Nuzum to perform the same phenomenon again, but asking him, this time, never to touch the book (not even to take it [off] of the shelf). It would be interesting to see if the same phenomenon will manifest again (provided, of course, that both book and page are chosen at random by the experimenter, and not “suggested” by Nuzum . . .).

Apparently Imich overlooked these lines in my letter.

Remembering this episode today, however, gives me the chance to also stress once more that it is not the duty of the critic to reproduce a claimed miracle. As should be widely known by now (but is apparently not to many researchers), the burden of proof always rests on the claimant. In this particular case, I would have considered it quite impressive if Nuzum could perform his miracle with a book provided by me. I would have made sure not to let him get anywhere near the book before the test, a precaution that Imich did not take. Quoting from his notes (*JSPR*, 61[846]: 336): “*He took from my book-shelf a volume of Gray’s Anatomy and [he] opened it at page 354*” (emphasis added).

In a postscript to his article, Imich added that a report about “the latest, never-previously-described paranormal events produced by Joe Nuzum” was in preparation. Fourteen years later, some are still waiting for some reliable proof of at least one real phenomenon produced by this self-proclaimed psychic. However, we stopped holding our breaths a long time ago. ■

Note

1. Victorian British medium Daniel D. Home, sometimes referred to as a super-psychic, was supposedly capable of moving objects, levitating, and producing all manner of supernatural phenomena at will.