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Okay, He Averted World War III, But Can He Bend a Nail?

By Andrew Tobias

". . . Uri Geller called the roll of the die eight times in a row; the physicists think the experiment was 'cheat-proof' . . . "

Not long ago I was driven part-way through the 79th Street Transverse by a blindfolded young Israeli, Uri Geller, whose alleged psychic powers are the subject of no little controversy these days. *Time* had called him "a questionable nightclub magician." He was out to prove otherwise.

For a questionable nightclub magician, if that's all he is, Geller has come a long way and fooled a lot of people. He is being studied by one of the nation's largest think tanks; he has recently appeared on the Merv Griffin, Jack Paar, and Johnny Carson shows. One viewer wrote in to Merv Griffin that all the spoons in her home had bent as she watched the show.

I first heard of Uri Geller from an investment-banker friend at Morgan Stanley, who had sat amused but disbelieving in the front row at one of Geller's demonstrations, while Geller purportedly bent keys without touching them, received telepathic signals, and attempted all manner of other amusing, impossible things. My friend was substantially more impressed, he admitted, by the half-hour film that followed. It had been made by the prestigious Stanford Research Institute, a 2,600-man think tank in Menlo Park, California, two of whose junior members, Dr. Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ, had studied and filmed Geller for five weeks and found no explanation for his seemingly "paranormal" powers. But it was only when my friend returned home, he told me, and put his own key in his own door, that he was really shaken. The key would not fit. It was bent.

Now Uri Geller was trying to coax me into his VW for a blindfolded drive through city traffic.

"Don't be frightened," he kept reassuring me in his nearly perfect English (he also speaks Hebrew, Hungarian, German, and Greek), "I can *do* it!" We compromised. I assumed there would be no pedestrian targets in the Transverse, so I agreed to drive with him there. ("Yes, your honor, I suppose in retrospect it does seem somewhat reckless.")

At the mouth of the Transverse I tied a heavy winter scarf around his eyes. There is no way to see through that scarf. Instead, Geller told me, he would see through *my* eyes. He has a sort of TV screen in his mind, he says, on which he receives such things.

The first and second times I blindfolded him, he would not drive. He said he wasn't receiving anything. Was I concentrating on the road? Could I see it clearly? Why was he not getting anything? He was sorry, he said; perhaps it was the light rain that was falling. (I had been told that telepathic signals move sluggishly through humid air.) He removed the blindfold each time, temporarily discouraged, and then, so as not to let me down, resolved to try once more. The third time he decided to give it a go. He went slowly, swerving dangerously — theatrically — from side to side but never so much as to cause me to grab the wheel from him. After negotiating a few curves in the Transverse and making his point, he removed the blindfold and drove the rest of the way on his own eyes.

However the trick was accomplished, it was obviously not done by "seeing through my eyes." I state that as a prejudice, not as a fact. I imagine that it was not until the third time I blindfolded him that I allowed him some peripheral vision—though I could swear only a man with a periscope mouth could have seen anything. What I *should* have done to justify my skepticism was to keep my eyes *closed* during the drive. But that would have required a greater passion for the truth than I could muster under the circumstances.

Harold Puthoff, one of the researchers at S.R.I., says he has taken two blindfolded drives with Uri, once using a sweatshirt as a blindfold. Neither drive, of course, constituted what Dr. Puthoff would consider a controlled experiment. Still, he was impressed: Uri drove so fast along those winding roads, Puthoff says, that another car, which was following, could not keep up. Dr. Puthoff explains that some people are extremely good at seeing "through" blindfolds. Unless an opaque bag is placed over the subject's head and tied at the neck, he says, you can't be certain that the subject isn't "cheating." (That technique of blindfolding has apparently foiled several otherwise supernatural people.) To date, S.R.I. has not done this with Geller.

Geller is, at least, an ingenious showman. I would have come away from his various feats as from any others I could not psych out—certain there was a simple, logical, rather ordinary explanation that escaped me—were it not for the seriousness with which the Stanford Research Institute has taken him. Though the *Time* story, according to Leon Jaroff, who wrote it, was supposed to make S.R.I. look exceedingly foolish, S.R.I., far from retreating from its study of Geller, has quietly resumed work with him.

Geller was brought to the United States by Dr. Andrija Puharich, author of *The Sacred Mushroom* and *Beyond Telepathy*, and 85,000 words into a book on Geller. He says that Doubleday, his publisher for the last two books, "sort of freaked" when they got a look at this one, so he is not sure who will publish it. If published, the book may or may not enhance Geller's already tenuous credibility. "It is a fact," explains Puharich, "that there is an outer-space intelligence that exists independent of any form we know and that operates through Uri and around Uri. That is the bare truth. My problem is to define this intelligence." Thus, the book. The book will *not* try to prove another of

". . . I was told that Geller travels by astral projection, causes things to materialize, and recently averted World War III . . ."

his theories—which he says would be very hard to pin down, but which he confirms is, in his mind, at least a serious possibility: namely, that Geller recently managed to avert World War III. "I can't substantiate that fully," he says, "because it involves so many people in Washington, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Moscow, and elsewhere. But it seems a good case can be made."

For the past year, Geller has lived with Puharich in Ossining, New York, when not out at Stanford. Puharich, who "wouldn't put [his] seal on anything that wasn't true," confirms that Geller often causes things to materialize and that he once journeyed to Brazil via astral projection, while lying on his bed in Ossining, and brought back a 1,000-cruzeiro note. He and Geller were also on a flying saucer together, though Geller has been asked—he won't say by whom—not to talk about it, presumably for fear of being branded a kook. Nevertheless, "It's true," says Geller. S.R.I. spokesman Ronald Deutsch told me that neither he nor the researchers had ever heard the flying-saucer or World War III stories.

Another of Geller's entourage is former astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who, you may recall, attempted a number of psychic experiments in outer space, with less than spectacular results. Mitchell has often appeared with Uri and was one of the principal financial backers of the S.R.I. film. (S.R.I. has had no financial investment in the Geller research. As with virtually all S.R.I. projects, the work is funded by others.) Mitchell has a book on psychic phenomena coming out next spring from Putnam's, whose editor-in-chief, William Targ, is father of Russell Targ, one of the S.R.I. researchers.

Perhaps the most conventional, and most effective, of Geller's supporters is Judith Skutch, who is president of the Foundation for ParaSensory Investigation, based in her elegant Central Park West apartment. Most of Geller's private demonstrations have been made there. It is this foundation which has put up $60,000 to pay for S.R.I.'s further study of Geller.

Mrs. Skutch is articulate and energetic, displays no eccentricities herself, and does her best to tone down what she readily admits are Geller's very showmanlike impulses. Though she may tell you about the time a pat of butter supposedly jumped up from a restaurant table and hit Walter Cronkite on the shoulder as he was considering whether he should agree to meet Geller, she will not ask you to believe that it happened, and she is not sure herself. (The most trusted man in America could not be reached to confirm the butter story; but he is said to have been quite impressed and to have met Geller subsequently.)

Mrs. Skutch claims no psychic powers herself, though her daughter and husband have them, which is how she became interested in the field. Her husband is a broker at Neuberger & Berman, an officer of the Energy Fund and the Guardian Fund, and a psychic healer. At present he is working with about a dozen patients. Her not-the-least-bit-spooky daughter, Tammy (by a previous marriage—the power is not inherited), was president of her eighth-grade class at Columbia Grammar last year and has been displaying extraordinary talents since she was two. At the age of eight she was destroying all comers at Scrabble because, according to her mother, she could see the letters even though they were face down. At first, not realizing her opponents were any less fortunate, she could not understand why they picked letters that did not make good words.

As for flying saucers, Mrs. Skutch says: "I don't know why everyone assumes we are the center of intelligence in the universe. Flying saucers to me make absolute sense."

Geller now lives in Manhattan, next door to Jascha Katz and Werner Schmidt, who are, in essence, his business managers. "Of course, it's bigger than that," confides Schmidt. "We are involved in the whole project. You have talked to Puharich. You know what I mean. We are only systematically preparing the groundwork so far." Presumably, "the whole project" is to get people to recognize the existence of the higher intelligence which has chosen Uri to make its presence known.

Both Schmidt and Geller are impatient with questions about money. Money is not the point when there is something of such vast significance at stake, they say. Yes, Uri gets a $100-a-day honorarium for those days he is working at S.R.I., but that goes quickly. Yes, in Israel he gave some 1,000 performances, but often for as little as $10. He never made much money. Yes, here in America he has had twenty or thirty public performances, at colleges and elsewhere, but the money does not amount to much. "Why do you ask such questions?" they ask.

Geller will be performing at Town Hall on September 25, to a likely sellout crowd of 1,500, at $4, $5, and $6 a seat. A camera setup will project his hands onto a huge screen so that the people in the rear can see. One can imagine how Geller might make a good living giving performances. Right now, "The Amazing" Kreskin is the highest paid psychic-of-sorts around, and he pulls down some $300,000 a year from his television series and performances.

I met with Geller twice at the Skutch apartment. He is good-looking, earnest, 26 years old, stronger than he likes people to think, I think, but not extraordinary. "A dashing young man from Israel," as Merv Griffin put it. Very salable. We tried a number of experiments, some of which worked, some of which didn't. One was particularly convincing.

Before I left home, I had drawn a valentine with an arrow through it, placed the drawing in an envelope, which I sealed, and placed that envelope in a Manila envelope, which I also sealed. I asked Geller to draw whatever it was I had drawn. He asked me to concentrate on what it was, to see it in my mind, and to try to project it to him. After five minutes of this, he showed me a drawing of a heart with an arrow through it. When we opened the envelopes and he saw he had been right, he was very excited.

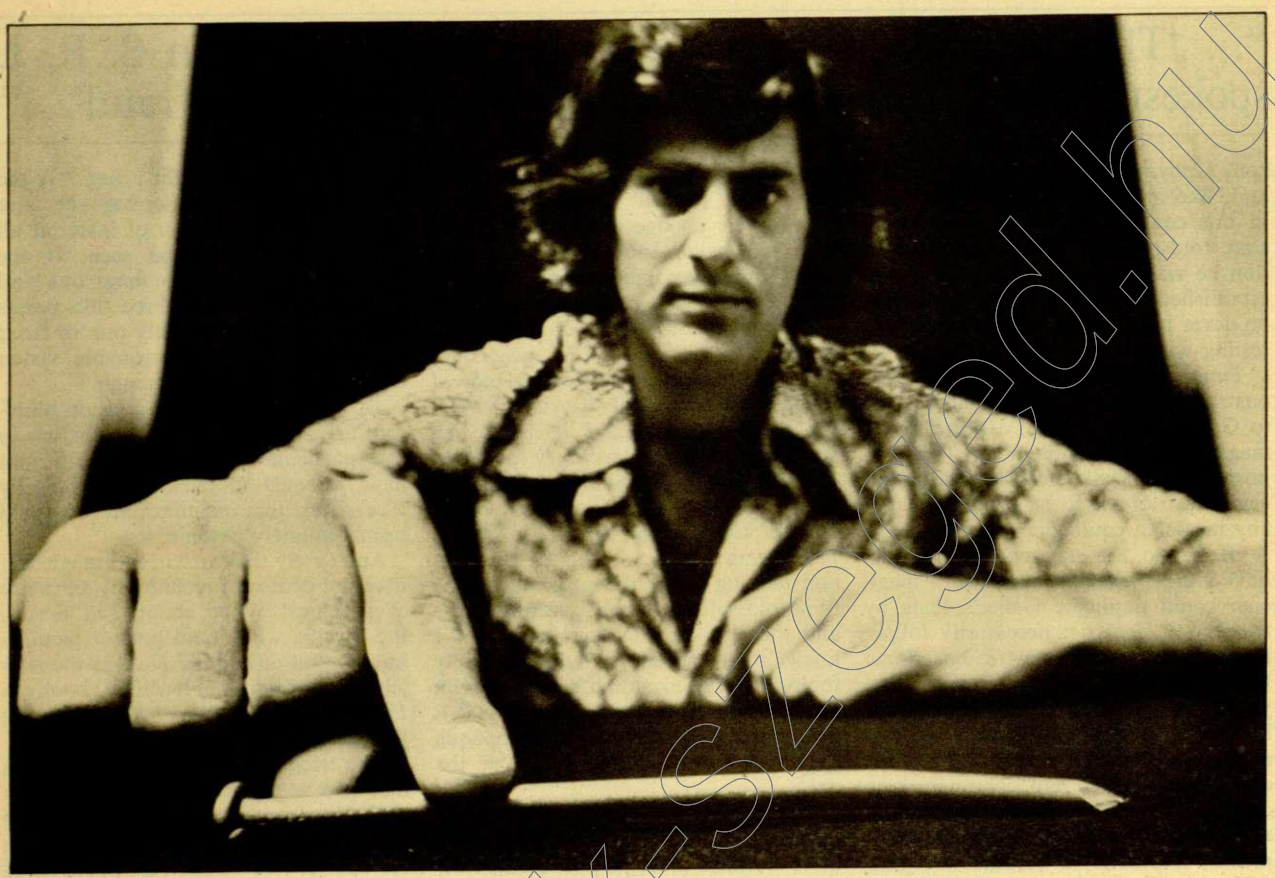
Now, the fact is, his performance seemed exactly that—a performance. As though, somehow, he had known all along what was in the envelope but was trying to pretend he did not. And, indeed, that may have been—must have been?—the case. But how?

My only rational course of action was to disbelieve my own eyes, so I did. That is, after all, the whole idea of magic tricks: to make you disbelieve your own eyes. Surely others, who would claim no psychic or supernatural powers, could show me equally astounding, inexplicable tricks.

Then they showed me the S.R.I. film.

The experiments shown on the film had been devised and controlled by S.R.I., not by Geller. Here is S.R.I.'s account of three of them:

Picture Drawing Experiment—In this experiment simple pictures were drawn on 3-by-5 cards at a time when Geller was not at S.R.I. The pictures were put into double-sealed envelopes by an outside assistant not associated with the experiment. . . . the subject made seven almost exact reproductions of the target



Geller strained to bend the spike through deep concentration. Later, the spike did bend, though not necessarily as advertised.

pictures, with no errors.

Hidden Object Experiment—Ten identical aluminum film cans were placed in a row by an outside assistant not associated with the research. The experimenters, who were not aware which can contained the object, would then enter the room with the subject.The subject would either pass his hand over the row of cans or simply look at them. He would then call out the cans he felt confident were empty, and the experimenter would remove them from the row. When only two or three cans remained, the subject would announce which one he thought contained the target object. This task was performed twelve times, without error. The probability that this could have occurred by chance is about one in a trillion.

Dice Box—A double-blind experiment was performed in which a single die was placed in a closed metal box. The box was vigorously shaken by one of the experimenters and placed on a table. The subject would then look at the box without touching it and call out which die face he believed was uppermost. He gave the correct answer each of the eight times the experiment was performed. The probability that this could have occurred by chance is approximately one in a million. [When Geller tried to capitalize on this ability at Las Vegas, he was wiped out.]

Though the researchers "have no hypothesis at this point as to whether this is a heightened sensitivity of some normal sense, or whether it is some paranormal sense [that Geller has]," and though they feel that the experiments they conducted were virtually "cheat-proof," they are cautious in their statements throughout, concluding: "What we've demonstrated here are the experiments that we performed in the laboratory and should not be interpreted as proof of psychic functioning. Indeed, a film never proves anything. Rather, this film gives us the opportunity to share with the viewer observations of phenomena that in our estimation clearly deserve further study."

There are two distinctly divided schools of thought about that film: those who are impressed by it and those who are not. Those who are not, I might add, have, by and large, not seen it. Yet they make a convincing case against Geller—and, in the process, S.R.I.—nonetheless.

Had Leon Jaroff held up his *Time* story a week, he could have seen the film at a Columbia University physics department colloquium. He chose not to. *Newsweek*'s science editor, Peter Gwynne, did attend the colloquium and reported on it, without derision, in *The New Scientist*, concluding: "With a cautious approach of this nature, it could be that parapsychology will finally undergo a genuinely disinterested study of its validity."

Jaroff says that there has never been a single adequately documented "psychic phenomenon." Many people believe in things like this, he says, because they "need" to. From the minute he heard about Geller's supposed powers, he knew Geller had to be a fraud, and set about gathering evidence to support that view.

For one thing, *Time* cited Geller's experience in Israel: "At first [1970] he was widely acclaimed; he came under suspicion when a group of psychologists and computer experts from Hebrew University duplicated all of his feats and called him a fraud. Eventually, he left the country in disgrace."

Benjamin Ron, vice consul for scientific affairs at the Israeli Embassy here, calls that account "very overblown." No scientific testing on the order of what S.R.I. is doing here was ever done in Israel, Ron says. "There is no question in our minds from a scientist's point of view that there is something in this guy."

On the other hand, Professor Kel-

Photographed by Dan Wynn

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zon, a physicist at Tel Aviv University and, like many of the people involved in this controversy, an amateur magician, told me that after much observation he was convinced Geller was "an established fraud." Still, Kerzon admits he never had a chance to do laboratory testing with Geller, as S.R.I. has.

Time editors watched a Geller demonstration in their offices. Unbeknown to Geller, James Randi, a professional magician, was posing as a *Time* reporter. After Geller left, Randi "duplicated each of his feats, explaining that any magician could perform them."

Of course, the stauncheſt Geller believers argue that just because a magician could duplicate Geller's feats by trickery, it does not necessarily follow that Geller himself uses trickery. Some Geller believers will tell you that, yes, they think he does cheat when he can—it's in his nature as a showman—but that doesn't invalidate his other feats, which are genuinely psychic. In other words, until a feat is explained, it is done by supernatural means; thereafter, it becomes a regrettable, but excusable, case of showmanship. As for flying saucers and higher intelligences—is it so surprising that someone who finds himself vested with psychic powers would develop some rather far-out theories? And how do we know there are *not* flying saucers and higher intelligences?

And what of the film? What does professional magician James Randi have to say about that?

"Scientists are the easiest people to fool," Randi told me, "because they think logically. Geller knows how they think, and that makes it all the easier to fool them."

Randi, a self-styled "legitimate charlatan" and a *Tonight*-show veteran himself, thinks that Geller is a fraud and a liar, and "a very dangerous man." Not only, says Randi, is he living off the money of people who believe what he says—and life as a psychic phenomenon is not a bad one—he also may lead people looking for things to believe in to change their view of the world and the way they lead their lives, based on false information.

Randi told me how Dunninger, whose television series I vaguely recalled from the fifties, used to go up to people on the street and ask them whether they had any change in their pockets. "Don't take it out," he would say, "Just tap your pocket." Then Dunninger would write on a scrap of paper the amount of change he thought they had, put the paper in plain view and move away from it. The people would count their change to see how much they did have, and compare it with what Dunninger had written. It always matched.

Clairvoyance? Neither Dunninger nor Randi will say how the trick was done; but both men disclaim any manner of psychic ability. That trick, one ventures to suspect, could keep the researchers in Menlo Park busy for years.

As for driving blindfolded, Randi just laughed at the simple test Geller had set for himself. He was probably just tilting his head up, Randi said, and looking down the space that such blindfolds often leave between the nose and the cheekbone. I let drop what I knew about blindfolds—that the only foolproof way to stump someone with a blindfold was, as Dr. Puthoff of S.R.I. had suggested to me, to put an opaque bag over his head and tie it at the neck.

Well, get this: Randi showed me newspaper clippings that described a drive he took through Red Bank, New Jersey, to drum up publicity for the local Volvo dealer. With gobs of pizza dough over and around his eyes, a blindfold over the dough, a double-thickness opaque bag over his head and tied at the neck, and a reporter right beside him in the car, he *still* managed to drive all around town.

How? All Randi will say is that nothing supernatural, or even technological, was involved. "Obviously I could see," he says dryly. "You can't drive a car without seeing."

A trip to Tannen's Times Square magic shop, which is a trip and a half itself, yields some clues to methods Randi may have used. Page 18 of Burling Hull's *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Mentalism* describes the "blindfold street drive" as a good publicity stunt to do for a local car dealer. An outer blindfold (or opaque bag) hides the inner blindfolds from view. That allows the magician either (a) to John-Ehrlichman his eyebrows, which should lift the inner blindfolds enough to allow some vision; or (b) to move the inner blindfolds out of the way with his hands, under the guise of patting them down to be sure they are on tight. Then all one needs is a trick outer blindfold. Corinda's *Thirteen Steps To Mentalism* devotes a chapter to blindfolds (the most elementary technique being the "Downward Glimpse" that Geller may have used in the Transverse). Corinda suggests using an opaque bag that is actually a bag within a bag. "If the head is put into the center bag—because of the double thickness of material all round—nothing can be seen. If the head is placed between bags one and two—so that you get three thicknesses behind the head and only one in front—then you have a reasonable vision if the material is thin enough."

Having thus boned up a bit on blindfold driving, I asked Geller whether in this particular instance he might not have resorted to trickery. He angrily assured me that *his* blindfold drive had been genuinely psychic.

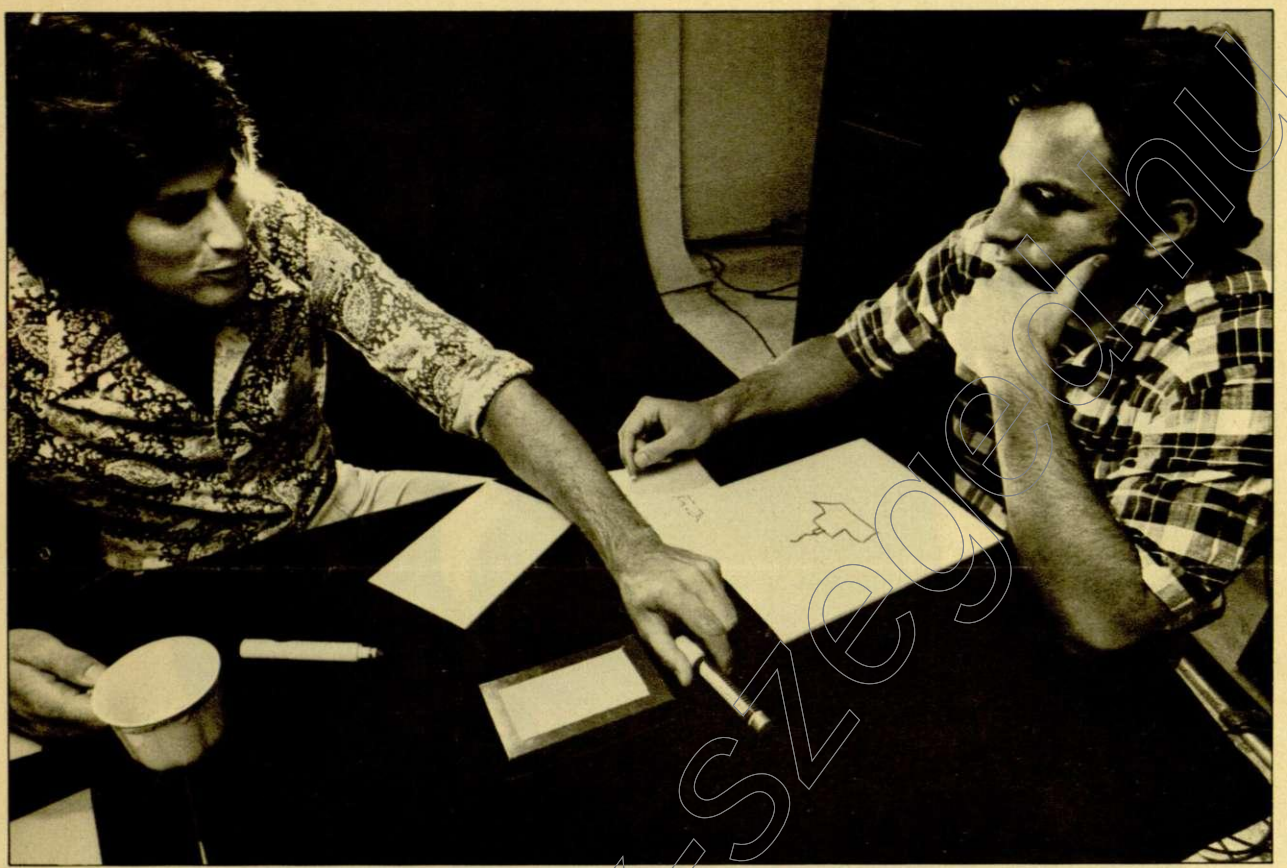
And surely the existence of magicians does not of itself preclude the existence of psychics! What about Ted Serios, the psychic who could project pictures in his mind onto film? He was the subject of a briefly best-selling book in 1967, *The World of Ted Serios*, by Dr. Jule Eisenbud.

The trick was done with a tiny lens that had a picture at one end. When placed in front of a camera focused at infinity, that picture would appear on the film or videotape. Randi appeared with Serios on the *Today* show and duplicated the feat. Like Serios, he merely palmed this small device. After the show, Randi says, Serios told his mentor, Eisenbud, that the jig was up, that his method had been found out. But Eisenbud, says Randi, by now a fervent believer in Serios's psychic powers, grabbed Serios by the shoulders and said, on the verge of tears: "What do you mean, Ted? You can *do* it; I *know* you can!"

And Kreskin? According to a story in *The Toronto Star*, one of Kreskin's most common supernatural ploys is to persuade his guests to write on a scrap of paper backstage what it is they will try to send him telepathically during the show, supposedly so that they will see it clearly in their minds and, thus, project it to him more vividly. They then destroy the scrap of paper, but return Kreskin's magic clipboard, which he gave them to lean on.

I have not seen Kreskin's magic clipboard; but Tannen's has them for $7.50. Under the surface is a concealed carbon and a second scrap of paper. Will wonders never cease?

What magicians may resent most about so-called psychics is the easy life they lead. If they can't make anything happen, they say they are not feeling right. If they can, they attribute it to the supernatural. The cardinal rule for dealing with psychics is, always be nice to them, or else they won't feel right.



Author Tobias had secretly sketched the steamboat, then tried to convey the image telepathically. The smaller sketch is Geller's response.

Geller's detractors charge that the S. R.I. researchers were so busy trying to make him feel comfortable, and so anxious to have something come of their experiments, that, even if despite themselves, they did not subject Geller to the kind of coldly objective scrutiny they should have.

I began noticing things about Geller's feats I had missed before:

On *The Merv Griffin Show* two weeks ago, Geller located the one film can out of ten that contained a hidden object. Naturally, that one can was much heavier than the others, and so, if the tray on which the cans sat were jarred, that one would move differently. I noticed Geller move the tray with his hand and bump the table with his knee several times. Sure enough, he found the right can. In contrast, on the Carson show, he failed at this trick. Carson, once a magician himself, would not let Geller touch the table. He says it was his impression that Geller was stamping his feet very hard in time to the music during a station break, perhaps in hopes of jarring the cans. If so, it didn't work. Nor did Geller succeed at this on the *A.M. New York* show. There, on the advice of a magician, large, heavy film canisters had been used in place of the light aluminum cans. These would not move even if jarred. Geller, attempting to eliminate the empties one by one, chose the full one on the second try.

I brought Geller a metal file box with a die inside. If he has one of those newfangled magic dice that have electronic "read switches" inside, he wasn't able to substitute it for mine. He failed eight times in a row to predict the roll of the die. He told me he never was any good early in the day. Next he drew a simple shape and tried to "pass" it to me telepathically. By watching his arm motions as he drew, I could tell more or less what he had drawn, and drew likewise. "That's fantastic," he said. (Indeed, he may have been truly astounded, though if he was, he was cool enough not to show it.) The second time, I covered my eyes with my hand as he drew, but peeked through my fingers. Again I scored. "Fantastic." He was hot. Then I drew a few for him, and he scored. "Fantastic." However, the drawing I had brought with me from home and had sealed in an opaque envelope proved impossible for him to receive. This time I had not let that envelope out of my sight even for a moment, as I realized I had the time we tried it with the valentine.

Then Geller tried to bend a metal spike I had brought; but it simply would not bend. He gave up and I left the room. But Geller called me back after a moment. He wanted to try again. He was holding one end of the spike in his hand. He concentrated, rubbed the spike, asked it to bend—and when he removed his hands *it was bent!* Either Geller had bent it by thinking very hard, or else he had bent it under his foot when I went out of the room, covered the bent end with his hand, and called me back in to try again.

"Our guys are aware that Geller sometimes resorts to magic," says S.R.I. spokesman Deutsch, "but that doesn't mean he is not genuine." As an amateur magician of some proficiency, Russell Targ should have been able to design cheat-proof experiments for Geller, and perhaps did. Even so, Deutsch is quick to say that S.R.I. has made no claims as to any powers Geller may have. "The work to date has been very preliminary. We've never ruled out the possibility of his being a fraud."

Perhaps Geller has performed genuine psychic feats in the laboratory—or something, anyway, beyond mere trickery, that is worth studying. Based on the film, that would certainly seem to be so. More likely, but nearly as incredible, the researchers have been fooled, or they are fibbing—a possibility which only in these days of Clifford Irving, Equity Funding, and the language of Nix-speak would I even dare to suggest. ■