

## The Enigmatic Mentalist Wolf Messing

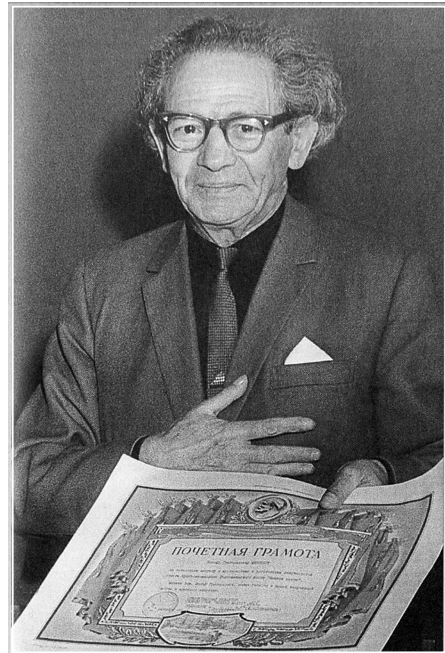
### Summary

The name of the Jewish psychic stage performer Wolf G. Messing (1899–1974) has gained in Russia almost legendary proportions. It is the result of a series of hagiographic anecdotes concocted by the journalist Mikhail V. Khvastunov (1920–1978) that were incorporated in articles published in 1965 as Messing’s autobiography. Although several stories of the Messing-narrative have been debunked, others are still enigmatic and in need of further investigation.

### Wolf Messing is portrayed as a man with extraordinary talents

The popular image of Wolf Grigorevich Messing as Russia’s “greatest psychic” exists of a handful of biographical details and a series of remarkable anecdotes.

The tale is more or less as follows: Born in Góra Kalwaria, a Chassidic village 25 km outside Warsaw, into a poor but pious Jewish family, young “Wolfele” ran off at the age of eleven. Without any money and without a ticket, he embarked on a train, and managed to make it to Berlin. Here, it was discovered that the boy had clairvoyant abilities and could induce himself into a state of catalepsy. Taken under the wings of an impresario, Wolf Messing enrolled in the world of vaudeville. Initially his act involved playing an Indian fakir falling into a cataleptic sleep; later he specialized as a stage hypnotist and mind reader.



While stationed in Vienna, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein performed an innocent test on Messing's mind-reading capacities. Working on mental instructions from Freud, Messing walked to the bathroom of the apartment where they'd met, picked up some tweezers, and plucked three hairs from Einstein's luxurious moustache.

Throughout the 1920s Messing toured the world. During these travels, he once met with Mahatma Gandhi, who, like so many, mentally assigned a task to Messing, upon which Messing, naturally, performed well. Back in Europe and with Hitler's star rising the mentalist prophesied Hitler's ultimate downfall. This supposedly caused a warrant of 200,000 marks put on his head. Fearing for his life, the Polish Jew fled from Warsaw to Russia in November 1939, where Joseph Stalin soon came to hear of him. According to further anecdotes, Messing twice passed a series of tests that Stalin had assigned to him. In the first, he was able to rob a state bank of 100,000 rubles, in the second he had to enter and leave Stalin's private quarters without an entrance/exit pass. On both occasions Messing supposedly sent out mental messages: he'd hypnotized the bank's clerk, and Stalin's guards were instructed to believe that he was the notorious Laventri Beria.

Messing lived for some time in Novosibirsk, and faring well he could afford to donate two airplanes to the Soviet army. Both planes carried his name. In 1944, Messing married Aida M. Rapoport. The pair settled in Moscow, but travelled continuously throughout the vast country until Aida's death in August 1960. Eleven years later, Messing became an Honoured Artist of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. He died on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1974, and is buried next to his wife at the Vostryakovsky Cemetery in Moscow.

### The Messing narrative is based on a series of "auto"-biographical articles

At first sight the astonishing biography appears to be told first by Sheila Ostrander & Lynn Schroeder in a chapter devoted to Wolf Messing in their bestseller *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (1970), and Tatiana Lungin's (semi auto-)biography *Wolf Messing* (1989).<sup>1</sup> During the last two decades especially,

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1 Sheila Ostrander & Lynn Schroeder (Uri Geller, introduction, 1997). *Psychic Discoveries* [i.e. *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* abridged, and *The Iron Curtain Lifted*] (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1997), 38–52; Tatiana Lungin (D.Scott Rogo, ed.), *Wolf Messing: The True Story of Russia's Greatest Psychic* (New York: Paragon House, 1989). The original version of Lungin's book, *Volf Messing, Chelovek, Zagadka (Wolf Messing, The Man, the Enigma, 1982)*, is available online at [http://www.e-reading.ws/bookreader.php/129599/Lungina\\_-\\_Volf\\_Messing\\_-\\_chelovek\\_zagadka.html](http://www.e-reading.ws/bookreader.php/129599/Lungina_-_Volf_Messing_-_chelovek_zagadka.html) (accessed June 23, 2014).

more monographs, novels, movies and documentaries followed, yet almost all merely reflect what already was written by Lungin, Ostrander & Schroeder.<sup>2</sup>

However, looking more closely into the sources of Messing's tale, it is obvious that all authors fell back on a series of articles that Wolf Messing published about himself in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Ostrander & Schroeder referred to this background in the chapter they devoted to him in the book, but mentioned it also in an earlier publication:

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- 2 Due to language barriers it is rather difficult to decipher how many monographs have been published, and where. Traced on the internet are (**bold** meaning that I have been able to obtain the publication): Lev Efimovich Kolodnyi (ed.), *Fenomen "D" I drugie: Fenomen "M"—Messing, Fenomen "K"—Kulagina, Fenomen "D"—Dzuna* [in Russian], Gos. izd-vo polit. lit-ry, 1991; Ignatij Shenfeld, *Ravvin s gory Kal'varia* [in Russian] (Smolensk, 1994); Nikolai Nepomnyashchy, *Wolf Messing: The Greatest Prophets* [in Russian] (Moscow: AST, 1999); Tatjana **Kuschewskaja**, *Mein Rußland: Reportagen* [in German, original in Russian] (Düsseldorf: Gruppello Verlag, 2000), 18–24; Topsy **Küppers**, *Wolf Messing: Hellseher und Magier* [in German] (Munich: Langen Müller, 2002); Varlen L. **Strongin**, *Wolf Messing, the Fate of the Prophet* [in Russian] (Moscow: AST-Press Kniga, 2002); Nikolai Nepomnyashchi, *Vol'f Messing (Great Prophet)* [in Russian] (Moscow: Olympus, 1999); Eduard Volodarsky, *Wolf Messing, Seeing Through Time* [a novel, in Russian] (St. Petersburg: Amphora, 2007); Mikhail N. Ishkov, *Vol'f Messing* [cinematographic novel, in Russian] (Moscow: AST, 2010); Oleg O. Feigin, *Wolf Messing – Ruler of Consciousness: Parapsychology Through the Eyes of a Physicist* [e-book in Russian] (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2010); Boris V. Sokolov, *Vol'f Messing* [in Russian] (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2010); Vadim V. Erlikhman, *Vol'f Messing: ekstrasens Stalina* [in Russian] (Moscow: Veche, 2012). Brief English texts devoted to Wolf Messing are: Vladimir Reznichenko, 'The Boy in the Crystal Coffin', and Vadim Marin, 'Messing Predicts', in: Sheila Ostrander & Lynn Schroeder (eds.), *The ESP Papers: Scientists Speak Out from Behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 32–37, 38–40; Henry Gris & Dick William, *The New Soviet Psychic Discoveries: A First-hand Report* (London: Souvenir Press, 1979 (1978)), 17–18, 25–27. Eduard Volodarsky was the scriptwriter of the tv drama series *Wolf Messing* (2009) directed by Vladimir Krasnapolsky and Valeriy Uskov.
- 3 Wolf G. Messing, 'About Myself [Recollections]', *Nauka i Religiya*, No. 7 (1965), 67–73; No. 8, 34–39; No. 9, 36–40; No. 10, 71–75; No. 11, 56–60; also in *Nauka i Religiya* (1988) No. 2, 32–35; No. 5, 50–51; No. 7, 38–39; No. 8, 48–49; No. 10, 51–53, and No. 1 (1989), 60–63. The references of articles by Messing published in other magazines, or by different authors, are: Anon., 'Wolf Messing', *Zapopyarnaya Pravda*, Norilsk, Siberia, June 18 (1965); Anon., 'Wolf Messing', *Nauka i Zhizn* 4 (1964), (pages unknown); Yuri Kamen'sky, 'Let the Light Shine [Burn]', *Nauka i Religiya* 9 (1966), 41–45, 43–44; Wolf G. Messing, 'I Am a Telepathist', *Smena* 14 (1965), 30–31; Id., 'About Myself. What Can I? Telepathy', *Literaturnaya Rossiya* 34, August 20 (1965), 21–22; Id., 'I Am for Experiments With a Capital Letter', *Nauka i Religiya* 3 (1966), 38–39; Id., 'The Future on a Palm', *Baykal* 4 (1966), 59–69; V. Ochan, 'And If This Is Really Telepathy?' [on W. Messing's experiments; in Ukrainian], *Znannya Ta Pratskyia* [Kiev] 10 (1966), 4–6; Mikhail Vasil'yev [ps. Mikhail V. Khvastunov], 'Wolf Messing, Telepathist', *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, January 7 (1966). The main sources for these references are the bibliography of Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 410–419, and Edward K. Naumov & Larissa V. Vilenskaya (Howard Zimmerman, ed.), *Bibliography of Parapsychology (Psychotronics, Psychoenergetics, and Psychobiophysics) and Related Problems*, Alexandria (VA: Parapsychological Association, 1981), available on <http://www.remoteviewed.com/remote-viewing-papers/>, downloaded June 20, 2014.

SOME OF THE details in this article are from Messing's autobiography. We [Ostrander & Schroeder] were able to read a couple of chapters which had appeared in the Soviet journals *Cmena* [*Smena*] and *Hayka i Religiya* [*Nauka i Religiya*] which we translated ourselves. The remainder of this biography was suppressed in Russia but more data was available from some of his friends.<sup>4</sup>

Ostrander & Schroeder presented no names of Messing's friends in their article of 1969. A year later, in *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, they declared to have checked Messing's credibility with Russian psi researchers – again without offering names –, 'friends of one of Stalin's granddaughters', 'the head of an Intourist office in Moscow', and Ludmila Svinka-Zielinski, 'a seasoned observer of the Soviet scene'.<sup>5</sup> The latter introduced Messing to American parapsychologists through an article in the newsletter of their foundation, thereby stating that she, identical to Ostrander & Schroeder, drew from Messing's own account as published in *Nauka i Religiya* (*Science and Religion*).<sup>6</sup>

Interesting to note is how the author of the romanticized, German biography on Messing discovered Russia's psychic performer. When Topsy Küppers, a well-renowned Austrian actress and chanson singer, visited a local library in Tel Aviv in the early 1970s, a Russian book grabbed her attention. Several sheets of paper, which were hidden in the book, showed a handwritten, German translation of some of the book's pages along with the book's title: '*Ich über mich*' (*I about myself*).<sup>7</sup> On tour in Moscow three decades later, she found and copied the "Messing biography" in full. Everyone Küppers talked to confirmed the stories about the amazing man – many friends in Saint Petersburg even helped her to obtain the corresponding, original press clippings. In other words, also Küppers relied on Messing's *Nauka i Religiya* articles of 1965.

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4 Sheila Ostrander & Lynn Schroeder, 'Russian Telepath: Wolf Grigorevich Messing', *Fate* 22(5), (May 1969), 62–67. The authors said that they had the opportunity in 1968 'to talk with Messing's wife'. Since Aida M. Messing-Rapoport's sister had taken over the role as caretaker for Messing after Aida's death in 1960 (Lungin, *Wolf Messing*, 36–68), the woman Ostrander & Schroeder met may have been Iraida Rapoport. The full references of the articles mentioned in the citation can be found in note 3.

5 Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 40, 44, 50.

6 Ludmila Svinka-Zielinski, 'Wolf Messing', *Newsletter of the Parapsychology Foundation* (January–February 1969), 14–16, referring to Messing's articles in *Nauka i Religiya*, Nos. 1–7 (1965), [sic, only No. 7 is correct, see note 3].

7 Bayerischer Rundfunk, *Topsy Küppers, Schauspielerin und Autorin, im Gespräch mit Christoph Lindenmeyer*, [broadcasted] May 16 (2003), 12–13, (transcript available on the homepage BR Alpha, <http://www.br.de/fernsehen/br-alpha/sendungen/alpha-forum/topsy-kueppers-gespraech100.html>, downloaded August 17, 2013).

## Critics break Messing's mythical image down

It's only relatively recently that researchers have begun to critically review the Messing mythology. Scrutinizing the time-lines of Freud and Einstein in corroboration with Messing's, for instance, makes it highly implausible, if not impossible, for these famous men to have sat down with Messing in Vienna in either 1913 or 1915 (the year varies), simply because, presumably, Freud and Einstein first met in 1927.<sup>8</sup>

There has been little debate about the Gandhi story. Jule Eisenbud considered it 'too slight and too weak to merit discussion', yet Topsy Küppers freely knitted a long India-episode onto it.<sup>9</sup> Brian Steel on the other hand used the anecdote to debunk a story told by the Indian guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba. In a lecture, this spiritual teacher had revealed to his followers that years before, he had met 'a lone man awaiting a train [Wolf Messing]', who had become 'excited and joyful beyond bounds' as soon as he had set eyes on Sai Baba.<sup>10</sup> The guru dated the occasion as 1937. From Messing's perspective the trip to India was set in 1927, in which case Sri Sathya Sai Baba, born in 1926 or 1929, was still an infant or not even conceived.<sup>11</sup>

Many of Messing's claims were scrutinized, or addressed otherwise, by Nicolai N. Kitaev.<sup>12</sup> He intensively searched in archives – or asked others to do so for him –, but until this day no documents have surfaced from the KGB or other archives to back up the warrant put on Messing's head, the claim of Messing's fame in Europe, the Stalin-stories, or any of the other narrative details. Hence, Kitaev came to the conclusion that Messing's articles were purposefully composed to impress the public and to generate sales.

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- 8 Jule Eisenbud, 'The Messing Mystery', *Journal of Parapsychology*, 54 (September 1990), 261–275, 266–267; Alexandra Nagel, 'Een mysterieuze ontmoeting: Sri Sathya Sai Baba en Wolf Messing' [in Dutch], *Tijdschrift voor Parapsychologie* 72(4), (2005), 14–17, 15–16.
- 9 Eisenbud, 'The Messing Mystery', 267; Küppers, *Wolf Messing*, 241–255.
- 10 Samuel H. Sandweiss, *Spirit and Mind* (San Diego: Birthday Publishing Company, 1985), 227.
- 11 Brian Steel, *More Messing* (October 2002), available online at <http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/stories4Messing2.htm> (accessed June 24, 2014); Nagel, 'Een mysterieuze ontmoeting', 14, 16.
- 12 Nicolai N. Kitaev, "'The Criminal Expert Clairvoyant' Wolf Messing: Truth and Fiction' [in Russian], *V zaschitu nauki (In Defence of Science)* 4 (2008), 102–143, available at <http://www.ras.ru/FStorage/Download.aspx?id=5676688f-f374-4b43-a1ad-e193bae6e1b8>; *Forensic Psychic Wolf Messing: Truth and Fiction* [in Russian] (2010), available online at <http://www.e-reading.ws/book.php?book=135247> (both accessed June 2014). See also: Yuri Zverev, 'Wolf Messing: Myth and Reality' [in Russian], *Neva* 8 (2000), 151ff, (available online at <http://zverev-art.narod.ru/ras/41.htm>); Vladimir Gubarev, 'Myth of Messing' [in Russian], *Pravda* (January 21, 2010), available online at <http://www.pravda.ru/authoried/21-01-2010/1009034-0>; Brian Steel, *Wolf Messing – a Lesson for Wikipediacrats*, available online at <http://briansteel.wordpress.com/tag/n-n-kitaev/> (December 31, 2012), (all three sites accessed June 2014).

One of the threads intertwined with this insight is the Messing myth-maintenance article by Alexander Kharkovsky. The US emigrant Kharkovsky asserted to have brought Messing into contact with the journalist Mikhail V. Khvastunov, who from 1957 to 1965 was head of the science department of the daily *Komsolmolskaya Pravda*. Supposedly, Messing and Kharkovsky got acquainted at the Esperanto Club in Moscow where they shared a mutual friend. In the article, Kharkovsky claimed he was witness to some conversations between Messing and Khvastunov. The men talked about a book entitled ‘Man alone with himself’, which was indeed written but not published.<sup>13</sup>

Tatiana Lungin presented a related yet different picture of the connection between Messing and Khvastunov. In her biography on Messing she quoted Messing as saying:

My friend, the writer and journalist Mikhail Vasiliev, with whom I spent several days at his country house near Moscow, asked me a thousand times how my powers worked. I knew his interest wasn’t trick [fake]. Vasiliev was then collecting material for a series of books to be called *Man and the Universe*.<sup>14</sup>

Mikhail and Vasiliev, also spelled Vasil’yev, are the first names of M.V. Khvastunov. He used them as his writer’s name. Combined with information offered by Kitaev, it is clear that Khvastunov intended to write Messing’s biography during the early 1960s and had the intention to write a bestseller. Precisely for this purpose the *Komsolmolskaya Pravda* journalist invented the anecdotes about, among others, Einstein & Freud, Gandhi, Hitler and Stalin. At the last minute the publishing company Sovietskaya Rossiya decided to withdraw Khvastunov’s biography on Messing; the amazing narrative then ended up as a series of articles in the monthly magazine *Nauka i Religiya*, already mentioned above. Under Khvastunov’s pseudonym and a slightly altered title, the book eventually came out in 1990.<sup>15</sup>

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13 Alexander Kharkovsky, ‘Wolf Messing – A Prophet in his Own Country’ [in Russian], *Vestnik* 6.1(5(81)), (March 8, 1994), 41–44, 43, (available online in a bad translation at <http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/1832752/post116596509/>; accessed June 2013).

14 Lungin, *Wolf Messing*, 77. Lungin also claimed that Messing had acquainted in the first years following the war ‘yet another remarkable person’, Aleksei Ignatiev (1877–1954) (Lungin, *Wolf Messing*, 63). About this man Topsy Küppers stated in a footnote: ‘Der Autor und Vertraute Messings, Aleksei Igantiev, übergeht in seiner Biografie detaillierte Aussagen über die Begegnungen Stalins mit Messing’ (Küppers, *Wolf Messing*, 316). Küppers didn’t give a reference. Most likely because she couldn’t: she will have mistaken Aleksei Ignatiev for Mikhail Vasiliev, see note 15.

15 Mikhail Vasiliev [ps. M.V. Khvastunov], *Wolf Messing: I am a Telepath* [in Russian, literary version] (Moscow: Interkinocentre, RIA, North-West, 1990). The book is listed under No. 21 of the bibliography on the homepage devoted to Khvastunov, <http://www.hvastunov.ru/copy/mihail-vasilev-hvastunov-bibliografiya.html> (accessed June 2014). See also Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 52; Steel, *Wolf Messing*.

Ostrander and Schroeder probably never realized that they bought into the hoax. When interviewed about Messing for the documentary *The Secret KGB Psychic Files* (1998), they were as much convinced of Messing's extraordinary life as they were in 1972, when they were invited to an episode of the Amazing Kreskin's television show.<sup>16</sup> Topsy Küppers was also unaware of the problematic angle with Messing's "auto"-biography. Not only had obtaining the original newspaper clippings convinced her of the authenticity of the work, Küppers had a colleague who had known Messing when he was stationed in Vienna.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, one day 'ein ganz altes Männchen' (a little, very old man) had come to her, and told her to have seen Wolf Messing on stage somewhere in Siberia, where thousand people had flocked together to attend the show.<sup>18</sup> The man completely confirmed Küppers' writing about Messing: he was additional proof to her conviction to have told a true story.

Perhaps the same type of reasoning is valid for Tatiana Lungin. Yet it is more likely that Lungin was aware of the mystification of the truth, and twisted facts by stating that Messing used the private notes she made in 1955 and 1962 of conversations she had had with him for his articles in *Nauka i Religiya*.<sup>19</sup> As far as is known, no one queried Lungin on this matter, so we can only guess about her motives for enmeshing Messing's real life events with fantasy, as we must guess about the motives of all others who have accepted the Messing-myth at face value.

### Trimmed of the myth, Messing remains an enigmatic figure

Knowing that perhaps not all, but certainly several conspicuous elements of Messing's public narrative ought to be dismissed, we have to look afresh at the content of the publications on Messing in order to construct a new image of Russia's "greatest psychic". Part of the deconstructed debris is an article by B. Bonch-Burevich. From this it turns out that even though Zielinski, Ostrander & Schroeder, and Lungin are the major persons to have drawn attention to Russia's famous

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16 Messing is portrayed during the first 30 minutes of the 85 minutes documentary *The Secret KGB Psychic Files* (1998), which is narrated by Roger Moore and produced by David McKenzie (<http://www.worldvideofans.com/en/video/221862/The-Secret-KGB-Psychic-Files-FREE-MOVIE>, accessed June 21, 2014). (Two excerpts of this documentary circulate on You-Tube under the heading 'Wolf Messing Psychically [or, Mentally] Robs a Bank'.) The earlier documentary in which the authors of *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* are featured is: 'Kreskin meets Lynn Schroeder and Sheila Ostrander', an episode of *The Amazing World of Kreskin* produced by Bushnell Communications for CTV, Ottawa, 1972 (accessed on You-Tube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rToveoMxVg> on June 22, 2014).

17 Küppers, *Wolf Messing*, 139–140. The actress is the Jewish, Austrian Elisabeth Neumann-Viertel (1900–1994).

18 Bayerischer Rundfunk, *Topsy Küppers*, 13.

19 Lungin, *Wolf Messing*, 21–22.

mentalist, they weren't the first to introduce him to the west. In 1965, Bonch-Burevich translated a Russian newspaper article on the man whose 'name is known to many: Vol'f Messing'.<sup>20</sup> Printed originally in the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on July 14, 1962, the translation appeared in an American parapsychological periodical. The author described how Messing performed a mind-reading act on stage, and how Russian scientists tried to explain such performances by postulating a connection between thoughts and muscle movements. In combination with three other early references,<sup>21</sup> this indicates that Messing's name didn't rise out of the blue; not all of Messing's life falls back on the articles 'About myself'. Prior to these publications, Messing was already noted as a psychic entertainer, and to some degree was linked to Soviet academic discourse of paranormal phenomena.

A different aspect that becomes evident as soon as the hagiography is subtracted from the stories, is the abundant reference to the specific way in which Russian scientists under the communist regime dealt with subjects like telepathy, clairvoyance, mind-reading, and hypnotism. We read about the discrepancy between the materialistic, reductionist's approach, and Messing's view about this. His performances were announced as "*psychological* shows"; the small assignments that audience members set up for him to test his abilities were explained by means of the "ideomotor theory". A trained observer, Messing supposedly picked up messages from people through minor, unconscious muscle movements, facial expressions, and/or changes in breathing.<sup>22</sup> Messing often had physical contact with the person whose task he executed. These tasks, or small assignments, were part of the show. The audience was invited to design a task that Messing could carry out, and to write this on a piece of paper. This then was handed to Messing's assistant on stage. Withheld from Messing's sight, the assistant decided which assignment Messing had to execute. It would be something like: Walk over to person X in row Y of the room, rummage in a wallet from the person's pocket, pick out specific item Z from it, and hand it to person X's neighbour on the left. Messing, regularly blindfolded, did as he was ordered, meanwhile holding the wrist of the person who had designed the assignment, and who mentally send him the instructions. The "ideomotor theory" explained the fact that Messing executed the task well by stating that he picked up information from the "inductor" by means of "ideomotor muscle movements".

20 B. Bonch-Burevich, 'Can One Read Thoughts?', *International Journal of Parapsychology* 7(4), (1965), 395–398, 396. It is unknown if M.V. Khvastunov was the author of the article in the Russian newspaper.

21 From Naumov & Vilenskaya, *Bibliography of Parapsychology*, 24, 29, 32; N. Mikhaylov, 'W. Messing's Psychological Experiments' [in Russian], *Gor'Kovskiy Rabochiy* (February 18, 1957); P. Oreshkin, "'Reading Muscles", Not Thoughts' [in Russian; an interview with Wolf Messing], *Tekhnika-Molodezhi* 1 (1961), 28–32; Anon., 'Human Analyzer' [in Russian; on Wolf Messing's experiments], *Moskovskaya Pravda* (May 27, 1962).

22 Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 43.



Khvastunov, presumably with Messing's approval, criticized this official theory. Within the "auto"-biography Messing is portrayed as being trapped in the Soviet system: he had to go along with the officially approved scientific explanation. Nevertheless, Messing dared to advocate alternative theories. 'The ideomotor theory doesn't explain how I receive abstract ideas'<sup>23</sup>, Messing was reported to have said, and regarding premonitions he was quoted:

My ability to see the future may seem to contradict the materialist understanding of the world. But there is not a particle of the unknowable or supernatural about precognition (...). There is not only the logical, scientific way of gaining knowledge, there is also *direct knowledge* – precognition. Only our indistinct ideas about the meaning of time and its relation to space, and the past present, and future, make it inexplicable at present.<sup>24</sup>

Also coming to the fore in the stories about Messing is that in another way he was caught in the communist system. Well into his seventies and his psychic powers failing him, Messing wanted to stop touring and performing, but was forced by the government agency Goskonzert to continue. He was told in no uncertain terms that 'it was his duty to entertain his public'.<sup>25</sup> Through sentences like these, instead of adding to the hagiography, the authors seem to have offered genuine data to shape Messing's picture. Hailed by many, the psychic entertainer was in later life seen as a lonely man, a widower with no children, a chain smoker, bitter at times, grumpy and depressed. Apparently, with nothing to lose, Messing could speak his own truth, and some of this seeped into the amazing narrative.

In addition to the written texts about Messing's life, there is visual material from which we can derive information about him. Often a handful of pictures are printed in the biographies; these are also posted on the internet as illustrations to bodies of text, and used as footage in documentaries.<sup>26</sup> Collected together the photos and film fragments offer quite a bit of authentic data. The images range from Messing portrayed as a good-looking young fellow, to an elderly man reading a book as he lazed in a garden chair, from fun pictures where he is accompanied by his wife, to a sad one where he visits her grave, from snapshots taken at radiant performances in rural theatres, to an official picture of an old, tired man dressed in a smart smoking jacket. There is no doubt that Messing travelled the

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23 Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 44.

24 Ostrander & Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries*, 51. Two weeks before his death, Messing is quoted as stating almost the same, see Gris & Dick, *New Soviet Psychic Discoveries*, 27.

25 Gris & Dick, *New Soviet Psychic Discoveries*, 17.

26 See note 16, and see the documentaries on the Polish homepage Wolf Messing Seen Through Time, <http://www.wolf-messing.manifo.com> (accessed June 2014), for instance *Secret Histories: Wolf Messing, the Fate of the Prophet* in which Tatiana Lungin is interviewed (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aivQ8-ZOMqM#t=16>, accessed June 2014).

country and stunned the people with his hypnotic acts, and other mental powers. At some point in his life he was a real celebrity throughout the Soviet Union.

Against the background of the hoax, one film fragment in particular remains a puzzle. In this recording Messing is seen to briskly walk up to a military aircraft that carried his name. The shot was taken during a happy occasion. All men



present look cheerful, and an animated Messing pats the pilot on his shoulder. This, then, cannot be a concocted event. But what, we have to wonder, is the story behind the images? Did the “Polish patriot Messing” really donate two air fighters to the Polish Fighter Regiment War-

saw, as Leonid Lyubimski said he did?<sup>27</sup> How much would an aircraft type Yak 1b-1PLM have cost? Was Messing so wealthy that he could indeed buy such military equipment? More intriguing is the question whether or not he gifted the planes voluntarily. Was the deed his personal initiative? Or did the KGB force Messing into the donation?

In his critical assessment of Wolf Messing, Nicolai Kitaev presented an alternative biography on Messing. Yuri Zverev, another Messing-critic, did the same. Both authors cited copiously from a story told by Ignatiy Shenfeld. Like Messing, so Shenfeld claimed, he was born in Góra Kalwaria. He also claimed to have been imprisoned with Messing in Tashkent in 1941. During that time, Messing shared a lot about his life with Shenfeld. In this alternative Messing-narrative, Messing initially refused to donate a million rubles to build an aircraft as the KGB had “asked” him to do. The KGB took this as provocative behaviour – it caused Messing’s imprisonment. Shortly afterwards Messing probably began to co-operate with the KGB.

Shenfeld’s story of Messing – as shared by Kitaev and Zverev – comes across as “counter-hagiographic”, a story compiled to downgrade the Messing-myth.<sup>28</sup> Although it is well possible that Messing was forced to cooperate with the KGB, this doesn’t mean that everything of the alternative Messing-biography is genu-

27 Leonid Lyubimski, ‘Aircraft Wolf Messing’, *MIC* 50 (166), December 27, 2006, (available on <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/3230>, accessed June 2014).

28 Since I had no access to Shenfeld, *Ravvin s gory Kal'varia*, my impressions stem from the accounts of Kitaev, *Forensic Psychic* and Zverev, *Wolf Messing*, which I read on the internet with the aid of google.translate.

ine. Hence, we might have to accept Shenfeld's story too with a pinch, or more, of salt. The implication of which is that the real story behind Messing and the two air fighters carrying his name is a story still to be unravelled.

Equally in need of careful dissection are the testimonies of individual men and women. Some of these persons have told their private experiences with Messing in documentaries. Since these documentaries are narrated in the Polish or Russian language, the content gets lost on those who haven't mastered these languages. Not in spoken but in written words, the physician Alexander Golbin talked about his personal experience with Messing in an American article. After rehearsing the usual Messing-intro, Golbin testified

I was among the lucky ones who were able to meet Wolf Messing off stage and personally verify predictions about my own future. Many of the prophetic statements were completely unbelievable then, but, with time, turned out to be true.

Messing predicted that I would be a doctor when I was twelve and told me to study English seriously five years before I was forced to emigrate from Russia. He asked me to visit him on a certain day to tell me something very important. I did not go because I was busy with my routine. When I came shortly after, I learned that I was too late. He was dead.<sup>29</sup>

Another private story stems from Joseph Messing, a distant relative of Wolf Messing. Joseph's grandfather and Wolf's father were brothers. According to Joseph Messing, and for the record, Wolf Messing's father was named Chaim<sup>30</sup>, nicknamed Bonnek. Wolf had an older sister. The children's mother died when they were quite young, whereupon Chaim Messing remarried, and two more sons were born.<sup>31</sup> The family was neither very poor nor pious (Chassidic), said Joseph

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29 Alexander Golbin, 'A Tribute to the Most Mystic Figure of the 20th Century: The Unusual Mind & Unusual Talent of Wolf Messing', *Sleep & Health Newspaper*, June 2004 (it was available online at <http://www.sleepandhealth.com/Newspaper/2004/June/19.htm>, downloaded June 2005). Among others, there is a testimony from the famous Polish hypnotist Olga Migunova (see the interview December 31, 2012 for the Polish tv-series Private History, available on <http://www.wolf-messing.manifo.com>, accessed June 2014).

30 See note 32. The name of Wolf Messing's father, as given by Joseph Messing, fits with the name on Wolf's birth certificate, not with the name mentioned in the popular narrative where he is called Abraham. On the certificate, the names of Wolf's parents are recorded as Gersz-Haim Messing, age 32, salesman, and Malki Liby, age 33, (the document is online at <http://www.wolf-messing.manifo.com>, accessed June 2014).

31 See note 32. Wolf Messing's half brothers were Mottel (Mothel, Motek), and Itzak. By putting together information handed to me by another distant relative of Wolf Messing (Pniel Abramovich, email correspondence November 27, 2009, and later), and diverse other texts on the internet, it occurs that some family members survived the Holocaust, for instance, the father of Martha Messing. A niece of Wolf Messing, Martha was the only relative of Wolf Messing who obtained a permit to visit Russia. In 1966, at the age of thirteen, she travelled to Berlin where "uncle Wolf" picked her up and hosted her in Moscow for 9 months. (See the

Messing, thereby contradicting the information presented by Khvastunov, and others about Wolf Messing's parents.

Within the extended Messing family, Wolf Messing is known as the extremely successful and wealthy psychic entertainer from Poland. One story still floating around is how once during a performance in Poland, Wolf made a cousin roll up a newspaper and let the fellow eat it as if it was a sausage. Another story concerns an aunt. When Wolf visited her and the family in Góra Kalwaria, Joseph was still a child and also present, Wolf asked her to hide a needle in the living room. He then left the room, the aunt hid the needle, and when Wolf re-entered, he immediately located the spot where the tiny object was hidden. Joseph Messing and all the other children present saw what happened, and remembered the event. Also remembered is that Wolf Messing travelled a lot but at some point settled, at least for a while, in Warsaw. 'Wolf was different,' Joseph Messing recalled,

He liked to drink and to party. He was very charismatic, and at his hypnotic stage performances, he was making fun of Polish people all the time. He had long hair. That was not acceptable, so everybody talked about it. But because he was different anyway, he got away with it.<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, the anecdotes of Joseph Messing and Alexander Golbin are in a way just more stories to add to the heap that already exists about the Polish-Jew and Russian immigrant. Regardless of the hagiography connected to it, they resonate with a ring of truth. Perhaps, if we keep a ring of truth in mind when assessing Messing-stories, we might be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Until all stories, articles, photos, and other documents have been seriously studied and evaluated into a coherent biography, this diverse, scattered data is the only thing we have of the enigmatic Wolf Grigorevich Messing.



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confusing article 'Wolf Messing: Mystery Continues' online at <http://aarticles.net/culture-art-history/13461-volf-messing-zagadki-prodolzhayutsya.html>, accessed June 2014; Lungin, *Wolf Messing*, 175.)

32 Telephone conversation with Joseph Messing (1914–c. 2010) and his daughter Luba on June 13, 2005.