



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

De psychochiroloog Julius Spier en de handleeskunde in het interbellum Nagel, A.H.M.

Citation

Nagel, A. H. M. (2020, January 29). *De psychochiroloog Julius Spier en de handleeskunde in het interbellum*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/83482>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/83482>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/83482> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Nagel, A.H.M.

Title: De psychochiroloog Julius Spier en de handleeskunde in het interbellum

Issue Date: 2020-01-29

SUMMARY

The Psychochirologist Julius Spier and the Art of Reading Hands During the Interbellum

The subject of this thesis is Julius Spier (1887–1942), a German Jew and hand-reader. Both Spier and hand-reading have been neglected subjects of academic scrutiny. Consequently, many opinions about Spier and his profession are merely based upon assumptions instead of facts.

Julius Spier plays a vital role in the life of Etty Hillesum (1914–1943), a Dutch Jewish diarist. When a selection of Hillesum's notes was published in 1981, this book, translated into English as *An Interrupted Life* (1983), became an instant success. Since then Spier is known as the hand-reader, therapist, friend, and lover of Hillesum, setting this young woman on her path of personal growth. As a pupil of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Spier practiced a form of hand-reading that was influenced by the Swiss psychiatrist. Spier called his method 'psychochirology'.

Over the years many have studied Hillesum's work. In these studies Spier is usually acknowledged for helping Hillesum to overcome many of her neurotic problems, but is otherwise ignored. As a result, there are no answers to questions such as: what did psychochirology exactly involve? What was Spier's relationship with Jung? How did Spier relate to fellow hand-readers? Who were his students in Germany? Did any of his students continue to read hands? What happened to psychochirology after Spier passed away? Aided by uncovering a variety of new sources, this thesis provides answers to these questions. It sheds light on Julius Spier and on hand-reading as a phenomenon in western society. Moreover, this thesis enhances our understanding of Etty Hillesum.

After the introduction (chapter 1), and an extended portrayal of the image of Julius Spier having come to life since the publication of *An Interrupted Life* (chapter 2), chapter 3 describes in detail Spier's hand-reading method. The basic supposition of hand-reading is the existence of connections between features of a hand and that person's talents, personality traits, health issues, and fate. A hand-reader is supposed to identify hand-features, and to know what these imply. The handbooks of hand-readers are filled with information describing such features (the shape of the hand in general, its fingers, the thumb, nails, and the lines and mounts on its inner surface) and the meanings ascribed to them. For a hand-reader, every hand-feature is in principle a nugget of information about the owner of that hand.

In this respect, Spier's hand-reading method – as laid down in his book *The Hands of Children: An Introduction into Psycho-Chirology* (1944) – is no different. Spier described numerous hand-features and assigned meaning to each one of them. However, Spier did something else as well: he incorporated Jungian ideas into his explanatory repertoire and principally parted from forecasting someone's future. During hand-reading sessions, Spier was able to 'diagnose'

a person's actual mental and physical state, and his 'potential' state. By comparing the right and left hand, he identified the aspects in someone's life which were blocking or inhibiting this person to live according to his full potential. With this knowledge Spier offered insights into that person's psyche, and offered advice on how to overcome private struggles. Spier's psychochirology aimed at leading to the unfoldment of a person's natural core being. To forecast events might inhibit such personal development.

The psychochirological method is illustrated by the report of Etty Hillesum's hand-analysis that was prepared on 3 February 1941, when Hillesum came to Spier's course as a subject of study. This report comes to no less than eighty five statements, hence eighty five hand-features correlating to eighty five aspects about Hillesum's being. The order of these statements reflects the procedure that Spier and his students followed during a hand-reading session. They observed the hands from three positions. First the client had to plant his elbows steadily on the table, the hands loosely pointing towards the ceiling. In the second position, the hands had to be put flat on the table, the palms facing downwards. For the third position, the client was requested to turn his hands 180 degrees, so the palms became visible. The report also shows that the statements have either a distinct or blurred description-interpretation connection. It's distinct when after the description follows a colon and interpretation; it is blurred when the interpretation is embedded in the description, or vice versa. Nevertheless, by following this procedure, Spier was able to sketch a surprisingly detailed, and rather accurate psychological portrait of Hillesum.

The main problem, according to Spier's diagnosis of Hillesum, was Hillesum's natural tendency to think more than to feel. Due to a positive father bonding (and a father being very rational) and a negative mother bonding (with an emotional, intuitive type of mother), this tendency had led Hillesum to an even stronger habit of overruling her feelings. Many of her health issues had their roots in her underdeveloped awareness of her inner life. Still, so Spier stated, Hillesum would be able to overcome her problems if she would consciously begin to pay attention to her inner life. Writing, for which Spier clearly saw her talent, would enable her to do so. As Hillesum's dairy notes show, several of the issues Spier had pointed out to her became themes in her private notes.

Chapter 4 explains that hand-reading is not as unambiguous as it may seem. Quite a bit more is involved than the identification of hand-features and their interpretations. Hand-reading is like a *Gestalt* with at least seven different aspects: verbal communication, intuition, (supposed) extra sensory perception, cold reading, cryptomnesia, Barnum statements, and *rapport*. These terms are used by parapsychologists in relation to the interactions that take place between a therapist, or psychic, and a client, or a mentalist and his audience.

All seven aspects can be distinguished in Spier's hand-reading practice. Spier posed questions during a reading (verbal communication), and tried to impress a client with a particular opening sentence to gain the client's trust (Barnum statements). As an experienced hand-reader, it may have occurred to Spier to have seen something in the hands, whereas in fact it may not have been triggered by hand-features, but by the simple fact that he had forgotten to have heard or seen something of the client (cryptomnesia). Spier must also have noticed a

client's physical appearance, and gleaned reactions to his statements (cold reading). Furthermore, he claimed to rely on his intuition and his 'sixth sense'. All these aspects may have led to *rapport*, the extra-ordinary sensitivity between, for example, a therapist and a client, a doctor and a patient, a parent and a child, that could lead to anomalous phenomena.

The notion of a 'sixth sense' (the paranormal) is a sensitive subject among academics. Yet within the setting of the hand-reading practice, it is impossible to ignore, especially since it is addressed by Spier and several other hand-readers of his time. Either with or without the existence of the paranormal, hand-reading remains a mysterious practice. Many correlations between hand-features and their ascribed meanings lack a physiological causal explanation.

Chapter 4 also addresses Spier's charisma and his claim to have magnetic (healing) powers. These aspects played a role in his interactions with Etty Hillesum, Leonie Snatager (1918–2013) and others. Both concepts are addressed in this study. Nonetheless, they are very complex and in need of further academic research – research that goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

The chapters 5 to 7 elaborate on Spier's life in Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, and Amsterdam respectively. Born as the fifth son in a financially difficult time, Julius was an unwelcomed child by his mother. He had a severe illness at the age of sixteen which left his hearing impaired. Despite his partial deafness, Spier aspired to a career as an opera-singer. An unrealizable dream, Spier remained at the metal trading company, where he had begun to work at the age of fourteen and had developed into an all-round, respected employee. In the autumn of 1917, Spier married and became the father of two children. Among his closest friends were the pianist, conductor and composer Lill-Erik Hafgren (1881–1959), the pianist Maria Proelss (1890–1962), the violinist Hanni Rocco (1896–1990), and the teacher and writer Reinhold Zickel (1885–1953). Spier and his wife participated in the free-spirited chamber music community initiated by Proelss and Rocco.

Unhappy with his work and career, Spier decided around 1926 to enroll in a psychoanalytical learning course by Jung in Zurich. While in Zurich, Spier's habit of reading hands surfaced. He had been practicing it as a hobby since 1905. Jung and other physicians set up a handful of small experiments to test Spier's ability to diagnose patients. Very impressed with the outcome, Jung advised Spier to open a practice as hand-reader in Berlin, and suggested he contacted Edith Andrae-Rathenau (1883–1951) to introduce him and his work to the high society of Berlin.

As soon as Spier and his family were settled in their new hometown, success followed. Journalists compared the psychochirologist Julius Spier to the psychographologist Rafael Schermann (1879–1945). (At the time, Schermann was a well-known clairvoyant reader of hand-writings.) Many people, including those with a medical background, showed interest in Spier's hand-reading method. His star remained on the rise until Hitler came to power and like all German Jews, Spier's freedom became restrained. Wanting to leave the country, he sought out opportunities abroad, but only as late as February 1939 he was able to migrate to the Netherlands. In the meantime, marriage problems had led to a painful divorce.

Once settled in Amsterdam, Spier set down to write the manuscript of what was to become the official introduction to his psychochirology. In the late summer of 1939, he proposed to his former pupil Hertha Levi (1916–2014). Within a year, he had attracted a few new and very dedicated students, who also became close friends. The inner circle of this group, of which Etty Hillesum came last, called themselves the ‘Spier-club’. For each ‘member’ Spier was a friend, teacher, and therapist in one, as is illustrated by the accounts of Liesl Levi-Wolfsky (1910–1997), Dicky de Jonge (1918–), and Hillesum herself. From this multifaceted position, Spier agreed in April 1942 to have his own hands analyzed by his most devoted students. The report of this event shows how Spier was teased, and how he effortlessly switched between being a teacher and a friend.

Those of the (extended) Spier-club members who lived long enough to see the publication of Hillesum’s diaries, remembered Spier as a charismatic, intuitive hand-reader and dear friend, who had the innate ability to help individuals overcome inner struggles. Spier, they claimed, was very serious about his work, had a zest for life, yet was also somewhat idle and naïve, especially when it came to women. Spier loved women – although not to the extent that many have come to believe through Hillesum’s diaries.

Spier died of cancer on the 15th of September 1942. About forty people attended his funeral. There were many flowers, nice words, music and a critical note, while, according to one of the speakers, he had been a man with ‘ordinary human characteristics’.

The next three chapters elaborate on the history of hand-reading in Europe, and the hand-reading milieus in which Spier participated. Chapter 8 sketches the long tradition of hand-reading in Europe by highlighting its major works and a few influential hand-readers. The oldest traces of the practice of ‘chiromancy’, as it was then called, go back to the twelfth century. Chiromancy was considered a divination technique. The Church objected to such techniques. Supposedly, the information diviners obtained wasn’t necessarily divine: it could stem from demons. Consequently, divination believed to be a dangerous practice. Yet throughout history there have always been arguments deviating from this way of thinking. In the Renaissance, for instance, many considered chiromancy, physiognomy and astrology as useful and ‘natural’ practices.

A genuine interest into the art of chiromancy arose after the early fifteenth century when the Romani people entered Europe. More men and women began to read hands and forecast someone’s future. Some used hand-reading, however, as a means to distract a ‘client’ so he could be robbed of money or jewelry. The fraud and deceit, and the gullibility of the people led to negative *imago* that nowadays is still attached to hand-reading.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century chiromancy had gone into decline, not necessarily as a practice among people, but as a ‘science’. Interest was sparked again when the French captain Stanislav D’Arpentigny (1791–1861) published *La Chirognomonie* (1843). D’Arpentigny innovated the art of reading hands through the creation of a human typology based upon the shape of the hands. Next came the French painter and hand-reader Adolphe Desbarrolles (1801–1886). In his book *Les Mystères de la Main* (1859), Desbarrolles presented several

hand-analyses. The novelty of these analyses is that they consist of a chiromnomic part (the analysis of the hand shape) and a chiromantic part (the interpretation of features in the palm of the hand). The first was related to the person's character, the second led to telling the fortune of the subject.

Further interest in the art of reading hands was fueled by the emergence in London of a lodge of the Theosophical Society (this lodge was founded in 1878), the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882), and the Hermetic Brotherhood of the Golden Dawn (founded in 1887). The old practice of reading hands, renewed through the works of D'Arpentigny and Desbarrolles, began to be named chiromy (or chirosophy). This was the overarching name for what became considered to be the art's two branches: chiromy and chiromancy. Important for the professionalization of the art was the foundation in 1889 of the Cheiromagical Society in London.

Chapter 9 is devoted to the phenomenon of hand-reading during the first four decades of the twentieth century in Germany. During those years new books and articles about hand-reading were published. In Hamburg and Berlin, people began to give lectures and demonstrations about hand-reading. People's interest in hands increased even more from 1920 onwards. More publications came to light, as did three movies. Besides, not only occultists and laymen studied hands, a variety of academics developed research that was related to hand-reading and progressive hand-readers began to incorporate ideas of the psychology of Freud and Jung. Just like astrology and hand-writing, hand-reading became a practice to learn about oneself. It was a vital element of 'German occultism'.

A handful of hand-readers stood out: Ernst Issberner-Haldane (1886–1966), Max von Kreusch (1892–after 1935), Margret Naval (ca. 1892–after 1951), Marianne Raschig-Körner (1874–ca. 1939), and Madame Sylvia (1882–1949), all living in Berlin. Julius Spier entered this scene in the fall of 1929 and immediately stood out even more. With his letters of recommendation from Jung and other physicians, he was in a category of his own, believed to practice an academic form of hand-reading.

In some ways these hand-readers helped to alter the negative *imago* of hand-reading for the better. This process was countered by those who weren't sincere and were, often rightfully so, accused of fraud and trickery. There were also major differences among hand-readers themselves. For instance, Spier was critical towards hand-readers who foretold the future. Issberner-Haldane criticized fellow hand-readers except when they, just like him, adhered to the ideology of ariosophy. As an ariosophist Issberner-Haldane believed in the supremacy of the Aryan race. With that belief, he was an embodiment of German occultism but quite the opposite of Spier, who through the incorporation of Jungian psychology secularized hand-reading.

Hand-reading in the Netherlands, presented in chapter 10, was embedded in a much less intellectual climate when compared to Germany. Mainly sooth-saying women practiced it; reading hands was one of the techniques they used. (Appendix 4 portrays fifty men and women who between 1900 and 1945 in the Netherlands operated for some time as a hand-reader. All except five advertised in newspapers to offer their expertise.) Hand-reading was

also viewed as a fun pastime, especially for young men and women in search of a spouse. The French ladies Madame de Thèbes (Annette Savary, 1844–1916) and Madame Fraya (Valentine Dencausse, 1871–1954) were famous with the public as clairvoyant hand-readers.

The perception of hand-reading in the Netherlands changed slightly during the 1930s when several new and serious books about hand-reading came out, and a few hand-readers began to present themselves as chirologists instead of palmists. Spier contributed to this change in the perception of hand-reading. He travelled to the Netherlands in 1934, to give lectures about his psychochirology and to offer private consultations. Over the following three years, he returned to do the same. The public definitely picked up on his ideas.

In the changing perception of hand-reading The Hague, traditionally the hometown of ‘occult Holland’, stood out. For instance, the hand-readers Willem Holsboer (1900–ca. 1945), Miek Janssen (1890–1953) and Else Parker (1877–after 1955) lived and worked there for at least a while. The most ambitious hand-reader was Philip Meerloo (1908–1942). He had opened his practice in Amsterdam in 1937 and intended to write a book illustrated with hand-prints of famous persons of his time. Similar to Spier, Meerloo’s project didn’t come to fruition due to him being a Jew, being arrested and, presumably, murdered.

Chapters 11 and 12 highlight the influence of Spier’s psychochirology. Of all his students in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands at least ten practiced hand-reading professionally. Some were Jews and Jungians, or related to Jungians, and had been able to leave Germany in time. Julie Neumann-Blumenfeld (1905–1985; the wife of Jung’s major follower Erich Neumann, 1905–1960), and her friend Katya Klopfer-Seltzer (1906–2006) became influential hand-readers in Tel-Aviv. Dr. Ernst Bernhard (1896–1965) became the founder of the Jung Club in Rome. Bernhard used hand-analysis in his private practice. Dr. Kate Marcus (1892–1979) was one of the founding members of the Jung Club in Los Angeles, and also continued to analyze hands. After the war, Annamarie Mommsen-Hoffmann (1903–2000) became a psycho(chiro)logist in Berlin. Margret Mamlok-Stern (1879–1953) worked as a hand-reader in New York, Elisabeth Engers-Jansma (1896–1982) did so in Amsterdam. Spier’s most outstanding student was Charlotte Wolff (1897–1986). Wolff, who had fled first to Paris and then London, published four books about her study of hands and a dozen of her articles were accepted by academic journals.

The sources traced indicate that these hand-readers, just like Spier, were intuitively gifted. It is through them, in combination with the publication of Spier’s book (published posthumously in 1944, and reprinted in 1955, 1972, and more), that Spier’s name as a psychochirologist has stayed alive among hand-readers. Hence, Spier’s message to use hand-reading to help people ‘to become who they are’ and to not predict the future was passed onto the next generations. Therefore, it is fair to say that Spier is an important link in transforming hand-reading from a fortune-telling practice to a technique to help someone to gain insight in his own psyche. Quite a few hand-readers, however, have acknowledged Spier merely because of Jung’s foreword. Jung has given the book a weight of importance that hand-readers, unaware of their own rich history, still seem to need in order to validate their profession.

The conclusion of this thesis is that the current image of Julius Spier is largely influenced by Hillesum's portrayal of him in her diary notes. This image is also biased as a result of the negative connotations that hand-reading has as a pseudoscience.

During his life Julius Spier was considered a charismatic, very talented, intuitive hand-reader, who practiced a 'scientific' form of hand-reading and who sincerely tried to help people to blossom in accordance to their core nature. This, after all, was the purpose of psychochirology. Due to his highly developed sensitivity, Spier may have been more aware than others of the existential tensions in society and the dangers to which Jews, including himself, were exposed. These war conditions led to the creation of the Spier-club, and contributed to Spier developing into a spiritual teacher whose ideas nowadays resemble those of the New Age movement.