Fanny Moser was said to be the richest woman in Central Europe. She was born on July 29, 1848, and belonged to an old Swiss patrician family, the von Sulzer-Wart of Winterthur. Her grandfather, Johann Heinrich von Sulzer-Wart, had been raised to the peerage by the Bavarian king and the young Baroness Fanny Luise von Sulzer-Wart was therefore part of the aristocracy that evolved in the Germanic principalities and grand-duchies. At twenty-three, she married Heinrich Moser, a sixty-five years old industrialist. The son and grandson of watchmakers from Schaffhausen, Moser had amassed an immense fortune by selling Swiss watches in Russia and the rest of Asia. (The company H. Moser & Co still exists and it is said that the expensive “Moser-Soviet” watches were very popular among the nomenklatura of the former Soviet Bloc.) Back in Schaffhausen, Moser had also founded a railway company and had built himself a magnificent castle overlooking the Rhine.

The marriage was happy, despite the age gap between the spouses and tensions with Heinrich Moser’s children from a previous marriage. The couple had two daughters, Fanny Junior and Luise Junior, nicknamed Mentona after the French town of Menton where Heinrich and Fanny liked to spend their holidays. In his correspondence, Moser did however mention his wife’s constant “nervousness”. On October 23, 1874, just four days after the birth of their second daughter, Heinrich Moser collapsed, felled by a heart attack. He left the bulk of his fortune to his wife and daughters. Furious, his son Henri spread the rumor that Fanny had poisoned his father. She was finally cleared after her husband’s body had been exhumed twice for autopsy and
toxicological analysis, but the scandal had been such that she was permanently snubbed by the royal and aristocratic circles in which she aspired to evolve.

In 1877, she sold the Moser watch company to the industrialist Paul Girard on the condition that he didn’t change its name and from then on lived on her income in a castle that she had acquired at Au, near Lake Zurich. There she established a kind of parallel court, entertaining distinguished guests from all over Europe. She practiced patronage and philanthropy, supporting for example the anti-alcohol campaigns of August Forel and Eugen Bleuler, the two successive directors of the Burghölzli psychiatric hospital in Zurich. She also gave 10,000 Swiss Francs - a considerable sum at the time - to build a mental hospital in Schaffhausen. She was known in the neighborhood for her eccentricities and numerous lovers, among whom were often one or the other of her doctors. Her “nervousness” had indeed worsened, probably due to her peers’ social ostracism, and she made a high consumption of doctors, psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Forel and Bleuler, whose signatures appear on her official guest book, knew her as a patient. When she did not hold court, she would take the waters in the posh spas in Europe. Yet the “nervousness” would not subside and there was always a new doctor to consult, a new cure or a new private clinic to try.

In the spring of 1889, after spending the winter in the resort of Abbazia on the Adriatic coast, Fanny Moser went to Vienna with her two daughters in order to consult Josef Breuer. She had most likely been referred by Forel, who knew Breuer well (they had studied together). She was depressed, suffered from sleeplessness, pain and various tics. Every two minutes, her face assumed an expression of disgust and she would make a gesture as if to repel an imaginary assailant: “Don’t move! Don’t say anything! Don’t touch me!” After having had her in treatment for six weeks, Breuer decided to send her to his young friend and
colleague Sigmund Freud. In her memoirs, Mentona Moser would reminisce about Breuer’s “first assistant”: “He was short and thin, had jet black hair and black eyes, he looked very young and shy.”

The treatment began on May 1st, 1889, at the hotel where Fanny Moser was staying. Freud's first decision was to send her to a private clinic in Vienna, the Low sanatorium, where he came to see her daily. Having found that she was easily hypnotizable (probably because she had been previously hypnotized by Forel), he decided to use for the first time a method recommended by Pierre Janet, which consisted in having the patient re-experience past traumas under hypnosis and “deleting” them by suggestion before the awakening. Freud immediately got from Fanny a veritable avalanche of traumatic memories. In the space of nine days, from May 8 to May 17, 1889, she recalled nearly forty traumas, ranging from the most dramatic (witnessing the sudden death of her husband) to the most trivial (being frightened by a toad). After seven weeks of treatment, Fanny Moser returned to Au with her daughters, her condition having apparently improved.

The following month, on July 19, 1889, Freud paid Frau Moser a visit on his way to Nancy, where he was going to see Hippolyte Bernheim with a letter of recommendation from Forel. Presumably it was on the occasion of this only recorded stay at Au (and not two years later, as he writes for the purpose of concealment in his case history “Frau Emmy von N., from Livonia”) that he was asked to examine Fanny Junior. While in Vienna, she had been treated by a gynecologist recommended by Freud and was now in open adolescent revolt against her mother (the relationship between Fanny Moser and her two daughters was to be permanently strained). According to Freud, Fanny Junior “exhibited unbridled ambitions which were out of proportion to the poverty of her gifts, and she became disobedient and even violent towards her mother.” Considering that “all her step-brothers and sisters (the children of Herr von N. by his first
marriage) had succumbed to paranoia” (?), he diagnosed the onset of a “neuropathy”. (In 1893, Fanny Junior left for Lausanne to pursue formal studies and eventually became a distinguished zoologist, before writing a two-volume book on parapsychology.)

Seven months later, Freud learned from Breuer that Fanny Moser made him and the Viennese gynecologist responsible for her daughter’s “illness”. As she was wont to do when one of her guests displeased her, she had stuck a small piece of paper on Freud’s signature in her official guest book. Her condition having again deteriorated, she was placed by Forel and Breuer in a clinic. There she expressed violent opposition to the physician who treated her by hypnosis following Freud’s directions. Finally, she escaped from the clinic with the help of a friend. In May 1890 she was back in Freud’s office in Vienna, her “hysterical” dislike of him notwithstanding.

This second course of hypnotic treatment lasted eight weeks and resulted in some improvement. Fanny Moser returned to Au, from where Freud continued to receive sporadic news. Tensions with Fanny Junior, who wanted to pursue scientific studies against her mother’s will, once again caused a worsening of her condition in 1893. The famous Swedish hypnotherapist Otto Wetterstrand, a friend of Forel’s, was called in and came especially from Stockholm in late September. (In anticipation, Fanny had sent Freud a note during the summer asking for permission to be hypnotized by another doctor.) Accompanied by her eldest daughter, Fanny then went to make a stay in Stockholm during the winter 1893-1894 to follow a course of “prolonged sleep.” This revolutionary treatment, which Wetterstrand had launched in the early 1890s, consisted in placing the patient in hypnosis for several days or even several weeks in a row. Unlike Freud, however, Wetterstrand found it difficult to hypnotize Fanny and it took him several weeks before he succeeded. Clearly, Fanny was raising the stakes.
In 1899, Wetterstrand was to report on twelve cases of “difficult hysteria” treated by him using the technique of prolonged sleep. Ten of them had fully recovered, another had hardly changed and the last one had subsequently relapsed, requiring a new treatment. This was most likely a reference to Fanny Moser. In September 1894, at a Congress of German Physicians and Naturalists held in Vienna, Freud had had the opportunity to ask Forel about Frau Moser. With her, Forel told him in confidence, it’s always the same thing: first she gives up her symptoms, then she falls out with you, then she gets sick again. We know from Fanny Moser’s guest book that Wetterstrand came back to Au in August 1896, obviously for an umpteenth treatment. As for Forel, he was called in in June of the following year.

Late in life, Fanny fell in love with a younger man who took advantage of her and extracted part of her fortune from her. She had broken with her two daughters and cut off financial support to them. Mentona, whom she loathed and who felt the same about her, had become a card-carrying Communist. In 1918, Fanny Junior, who was now married to Jaroslav Hoppe, tried in vain to place her mother under guardianship. She wrote on July 13 to Freud, asking him to write a formal report on the mental state of her mother during her treatment with him.

Freud replied obliquely, justifying himself for having sided at the time with the mother against the daughter: “It is with great interest that I have learned that you are that little Fanny about whom I was so concerned and was called by Frau Fanny Moser to come to Au. You are right, at that time I did almost nothing for you, I didn’t understand anything about you. Please, kindly consider that at that time I also did not understand the case of your mother, although she had been my patient twice for a period of several weeks. [...] Especially thanks to this case and its outcome, I understood that the treatment with hypnosis is meaningless and useless, and I got the impulse to invent the
more rational psychoanalytic therapy.” A surprising statement, for if this were the case, why didn’t Freud inform the readers of Studies on Hysteria, published five years later?

Freud then reread the previous episode through the lens of his more recent theories, as if this could be of any help to Fanny Hoppe-Moser and her sister in their conflict with their mother: “Your mother’s behavior towards you and your sister is far from being as enigmatic to me as it is to you. I can offer you the simple explanation that she loved her children just as tenderly as she also hated them bitterly (what we term ambivalence); and that this was so already then -- in Vienna.” In 1935, Freud drove the point home when thanking Fanny Hoppe-Moser for her book on occultism: “I can not blame you for not having yet forgiven my bad diagnostic error of the time. Not only was I still very inexperienced, but our art of reading the hidden psyche was still in its infancy. Ten, maybe five years later, I could not have failed to guess that the poor woman led a difficult struggle against her unconscious hatred for her two children and tried to defend herself by means of over-tenderness. These evil ghosts seem to have surfaced later in reworked form and determined her behavior. But back then I did not understand anything and just believed in her information.”

Fanny Moser had died ten years earlier, on April 2, 1925, still out of touch with her two daughters and still rich despite the millions siphoned off by her lover. Obituaries saluted the great philanthropist and patron of the arts, who had helped so many talents to bloom.

Sources:

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