

**ELSIE CHOMSKY:**  
A Life in Jewish Education

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#### ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE NOTES

EC-- Elsie Chomsky

WC-- William Chomsky

TI-- Teachers Institute

JTS--Jewish Theological Seminary

JEd--Jewish Education

EJ ---Encyclopedia Judaica.JE--- Jewish Encyclopedia

Each year at graduation the faculty of Gratz College, the oldest institution in the United States for training Hebrew school teachers and for the academic study of Judaism, processed solemnly in their academic regalia, Ph.Ds and rabbis with color-emblazoned gowns and hoods signaling the institutions from which they themselves had graduated. Each year Elsie Chomsky, the only woman teacher, holder of a diploma from the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, chose to sit in the audience. She too could have marched with the faculty in a simple black gown, but she would not. What was the meaning of this gesture?

A major figure for decades in Jewish education in Philadelphia-- teacher, mentor, source of inspiration to Gratz College students and Hadassah women-- Elsie Chomsky (1903-1972) left a sparse 'paper trail.' Moreover she was overshadowed by her husband, noted Hebrew grammarian, author, and educator William Chomsky. Hence her own significant contribution as a Hebraist educator, especially as a trainer of teachers, has not been adequately recognized. Yet neither her achievements nor her frustrations and limitations can be thoughtfully assessed without integrating the narrative of her professional life into her life as daughter, sister, wife, friend, mother, grandmother. What follows is a story of three generations with Elsie as its vital center.

Elsie (Simonofsky) Chomsky was born in 1903<sup>1</sup> in Bobruisk, a town near Minsk in what is now Belarus. At the time of her birth Bobruisk was home to a bustling, diverse Jewish community of about 20,000--over half the town's population-- with a wide range of institutions and organizations. It was a center of Bundist organizing and of early Zionist fervor, yet also home to circles of Hasidim and misnagdim. It had a vital Yiddish theater, lively journals and newspapers, and a noted publishing house. Bobruisk was the birthplace of important figures in Jewish political and cultural life, including Zionist leader Berl Katznelson and Yiddish poet Celia Dropkin.<sup>2</sup>

Elsie was the youngest of six daughters of Elimelech and Fanny Simonofsky. The family became part of the massive migration of East European Jews to the United States. Her oldest sister Rose, accompanied by an uncle, was at fourteen the first to leave. In New York Rose boarded with a family, took the ferry every morning to work in a bed-making factory in Hoboken, New Jersey, and began saving for the others' passage. Elimelech Simonofsky then emigrated to New York in 1904, when Elsie was an infant.<sup>3</sup> Fanny and her remaining five daughters-

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<sup>1</sup> She wrote "April, 1903" as her birth date on her application to the TI. But she told her children that none of the sisters knew their exact birth dates, and moreover that some gave their ages incorrectly at Ellis Island because her mother brought several children from another family whose ages had to 'fit in.' EC file in Office of the Registrar, JTS, and interview with David and Judie Chomsky, June 19, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> On Bobruisk, see *EJ* and *JE*; Yehuda Slutsky, ed, *Bobruisk: Sefer Zikaron* (Tel Aviv, 1967); and the Bobruisk Web page, <http://www.jewishgen.org.shtetlinks.bobruisk/bobruisk.html>. In Bobruisk the family name may have been Shimnavski, the closest-sounding name that appears in the Yizkor book.

<sup>3</sup> The narrative about EC's parents and siblings is in large part a composite drawn from telephone interviews with Elsie's niece Florence (Kronhaus) Heilner (Rose's daughter), April 16 and May 9, 1997 and her nephew Arthur Wilner (Anna's son), April 13, 1997, and where indicated, of stories EC passed on to her own

-several other children died very young—hence were probably still in Bobruisk in 1905 at the time of a devastating pogrom, one of a wave of pogroms that swept through Russia in the unrest and upheaval accompanying the failed 1905 revolution. She and her daughters sailed from Hamburg, Germany in 1906 to join Elimelech and Rose in the United States.

The family settled in Brownsville, a section of Brooklyn northeast of Flatbush, where by 1906 a rapidly expanding and vibrant Jewish community was creating a multiplicity of educational, philanthropic, and political organizations, the latter including varieties of socialists, anarchists, and Zionists. As in Bobruisk, a whole range of sometimes squabbling, sometimes cooperating groups was active. The public sector was also expanding, with new public schools and civic services reaching out to the mass of immigrants. Elsie was fortunate to grow up as this wave was still expanding.<sup>4</sup> The severe poverty and disorientation of the immigrants was to some extent mitigated by the explosion of institutions. Brownsville was a predominantly Jewish enclave, with so many synagogues and small minyanim that it was often half-humorously referred to as “Jerusalem of America.”<sup>5</sup> Elsie’s parents never learned English, so all the children had to communicate with them in Yiddish.

In 1910 Elsie Simonofsky started public school at P.S. 109, the local elementary school at the corner of Dumont and Sackman streets, one of several built in the neighborhood to accommodate the large and rapid influx of immigrants. The principal was Oswald Schlockow, a Berlin-born Jew with a recent doctorate from NYU, a talented and many-sided educator who later headed Brownsville’s Hebrew Educational Society and eventually became a district superintendent.<sup>6</sup>

Elsie Simonofsky’s educational environment as she became a little older was twofold: P.S. 109, and the nearby Stone Avenue Talmud Torah, housed in a substantial new four-story brick building which had been constructed in 1911 and enrolling close to a thousand students.<sup>7</sup> She began studying there in 1914, when she was eleven. Lillian (Levinthal) Kaplan, who lived around the corner and first became friends with Elsie when they were in the fourth grade together at P.S.

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children; the latter are from interviews with Noam Chomsky on April 29, 1997 and October 24, 1997, and from an interview with David and Judie Chomsky, June 19, 1997. The 1904 and 1906 dates, and other dates for her schooling and her early teaching experiences, are from EC’s application to the TI and from her records there, which are on file in the Office of the Registrar at JTS.

<sup>4</sup> See Alter F. Landesman, *Brownsville: The Birth, Development, and Passing of a Jewish Community in New York* (New York: Bloch, 1969). The childhood memories of Brownsville in Alfred Kazin’s celebrated memoir *A Walker in the City* are from a somewhat later time when EC was already a young woman, living and teaching there.

<sup>5</sup> This expression mimics the way Vilna was often referred to as “Jerusalem of Lithuania.”

<sup>6</sup> Schlockow’s doctorate, which he completed in 1905, was in pedagogy. For his later achievements, see Samuel P. Abelov, *History of Brooklyn Jewry* (New York: Scheba, 1937), 175-6, and Landesman, 159-160. Technically Schlockow was head only of the Boys’ Division at P.S. 109, but he would have exercised influence on the girls as well.

<sup>7</sup> Landesman, 68, 228. Located at 386 Stone Avenue, the institution’s official name was ‘The Hebrew Free School of Brownsville’ but it was popularly referred to as above. The new building, replacing an outgrown wood-frame structure, had nineteen classrooms, a synagogue that could hold 800 people, and other facilities. The large hall was also used for mass meetings, for example during labor organizing.

109, also went to classes with her close friend at Stone Avenue. She remembers that both girls loved learning and enjoyed walking through the neighborhood, playing catch, going to the public library, and having all sorts of girlish fun together.<sup>8</sup>

Only a few blocks separated Stone Avenue from the shul where Elsie's father davened, but the difference was great. Elimelech Simonofsky, who in the US became 'Max,' prayed at Anshe Bobruisk on Christopher Street, a 'landsmanshaft shul', typical of Jewish immigrant areas, where men from the same shtetl or town in the old country could pray and socialize with others who knew the same rituals and who spoke Yiddish with the same pronunciation. After services on Shabbat, he would come home with some of the other Bobruisk men and they would extend their shared worship by sitting and singing in loud voices.

The Stone Avenue Talmud Torah was, by contrast, a community-wide institution with a progressive bent. Since 1910, when Jewish-education reformer Samson Benderly had first convened the heads of many of the major Talmud Torahs in New York to discuss modernization and standardization of the curriculum, an influx of Benderly-trained and inspired educators had brought great changes to these previously traditional institutions. Contributions from wealthy 'uptown' philanthropists together with the contentious but productive emergence of a city-wide body, the New York Kehillah, produced rapid alteration, particularly in the provision of Jewish education for girls.<sup>9</sup> For Elsie Simonofsky, the next-to-youngest in a large and poor immigrant family, the warmth and stimulation of Stone Avenue and later of the Teachers Institute eventually led her to a professional 'home'.

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<sup>8</sup> Telephone interview with Lillian "Lu" (Levinthal) Kaplan, May 20, 1997. Kaplan went on to Erasmus Hall High School and Brooklyn College, then to an M.A. program at NYU. She had a long career in education which included presenting programs of Haiku and choral speaking on television in New York. She and EC remained friends into adulthood; she often came for Passover seders when the Chomskys' sons were young.

<sup>9</sup> Samson Benderly (1876-1944), a native of Safed, Palestine who studied medicine at Johns Hopkins, gave up that career to devote himself to creating a form of Jewish education that would give American Jewish children a deep attachment to the Jewish people together with a love and knowledge of Hebrew. Greatly influenced by the pedagogy of John Dewey, Benderly created in Baltimore an innovative Hebrew school. "Benderly taught Bible with a stereopticon and homemade slides. He instituted play periods, taught Hebrew through games, and employed the natural method of language instruction [later called 'lvrit b'lvrit'] ..Student government, extracurricular activities, holiday celebrations....were other indicators of...his showcase school." Arthur Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-22* (New York: Columbia, 1970), 122.

On Benderly see Nathan H. Winter, *Jewish Education in a Pluralist Society* (New York: NYU Press, 1966); the special issue of *JEd* in his memory (20:3, Summer 1949); and "Samson Benderly, The Teachers Institute, and the Origins of Hebrew Schooling in America," talk given by David Kaufman at the 29th annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, Massachusetts, December 22, 1997.

For a broad perspective see Ch.4, "School: Jewish Education at the Center" in David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: the 'Synagogue-Center' in American History* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England), and Ronald Kronish, "The Influence of John Dewey on Jewish Education in America," Ed.D. diss., Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1979.

For life in the Simonofsky household was problematic. According to what Elsie in later life told her children, her father was authoritarian and dictatorial, her mother submissive. Moreover her father scorned girls. Elsie's brother Joe, the long-awaited son, was born soon after the family was settled in Brownsville. Her father dreamed and planned that Joe would become a rabbi; for his six daughters he apparently had little use. Elsie recalled bitterly that when she was a teenager, if she was walking along with her friends and spied her father approaching, she would cross the street with her friends to be spared the humiliation of having him walk right by and ignore her. The Simonofsky parents were extremely Orthodox, but the children all rebelled, in adolescence deliberately doing forbidden things like smoking on Shabbes. Several of the siblings became involved in leftist causes. Her brother Joe, in fantasy the future rabbi, turned out to be a politically radical atheist.

Lillian Kaplan recalls that the family members often spoke sharply and sarcastically to one another. Once she happened to bring a male friend along to the Simonofskys. He afterwards said in dismay "These are your friends?"<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, despite the difficult atmosphere, Elsie seems to have had from early on the ability to form and maintain close relationships. She had a lifelong closeness with her siblings, especially Sophie and Joe, the two nearest to her in age. And friends from very different periods in her life typically recall her--as Lillian Kaplan does --by saying with feeling "We were very close." Protégés of Benderly, who came to be known as "Benderly Boys", visited the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah as early as 1911 introducing slides, drama, and holiday festivities of various sorts. They also initiated two programs for girls. Through the Extension School, which started in 1914, elementary-school girls by the hundreds came to auditorium-based programs where they learned the basics of Jewish culture through song, story, and audio-visual presentations; for the smaller and more elite Preparatory School, sixth, seventh and eighth grade girls who were excellent students at the local public schools were selected and invited; they came to Stone Avenue for instruction three times a week. Benderly thought girls such as these a potent source of future teachers.<sup>11</sup> Elsie probably participated in at least one of these two programs, possibly both.<sup>12</sup>

In 1913 Benderly started a small Hebrew High School class at Stone Avenue for a group of especially talented boys who had graduated from the Talmud Torah.<sup>13</sup> At first this high school program was only for boys. But within a year of Elsie

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<sup>10</sup> Lillian Kaplan interview, cited above.

<sup>11</sup> Both programs were initiated by the Bureau of Jewish Education not only at Stone Avenue but at some other major Talmud Torahs. The mass-education Extension classes also had a small-group component. See Mordecai Soltes, "Dr. Benderly's Projects in Extension Education", *JEd* 20:3 (Summer 1949): 15-25. On the four Preparatory Schools--two in Harlem, one at the Downtown Talmud Torah and one at Stone Avenue--see Rebecca Brickner, "As I Remember Dr. Benderly," *JEd* 20: 3 Summer 1949): 53-59.

<sup>12</sup> In listing her earlier education on her TI documents she simply writes 'Stone Avenue T.T., 1914-1917.' In 1914 she was either in fifth or sixth grade (she apparently completed eight years of primary school in seven years), so perhaps she went first to the Extension program before being recommended for the Preparatory classes. No Stone Avenue archives are extant.

<sup>13</sup> Landesman, 229.

Simonofsky's graduation from the eighth grade of P.S. 109 (1917) and her concurrent completion of her afternoon and weekend girls' classes at Stone Avenue, the expanding Hebrew High School was opened to girls, and she began attending (1918-19). Meanwhile, she was continuing her public-school education at Eastern District High School in the nearby Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

And from a different source, more help arrived which would affect Elsie's future. In 1916 lawyer Louis Marshall, a leading figure in the American Jewish community, gave \$150,000 in memory of his wife Florence, the interest of which was to be used to further the religious education of the Jewish girls of New York. Since Samson Benderly had already initiated selective preparatory classes for girls at four of the larger Talmud Torahs, including Stone Avenue, with Marshall's approval he used this generous gift to strengthen and ensure the future of those programs, thereafter known as Florence Marshall Schools.<sup>14</sup>

It is useful, before considering Elsie's choice of Teachers Institute, to look at the pattern of schooling in the Simonofsky family, in which the level of education achieved was inversely related to age. Elsie's oldest sisters, Rose and Anna, never had a chance to go to public school in the United States, but when they arrived went right to work in factories and sweatshops; Anna learned to read and write English in her forties, at night school; Rose somehow learned on her own. Dora, the third sister, completed eighth grade and subsequently worked as a seamstress. (Bessie, next in line, was deaf, mute, and also in some way disturbed; she was eventually institutionalized at Rockland State Hospital.)<sup>15</sup> Sophie, just a little older than Elsie, was the first to complete high school; she became a secretary. Only Joe went to college. He graduated from CCNY and became a high school teacher.

Elsie, sixth in line, gifted and studious, chose the three-year program offered by the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, into which she was accepted just as she was beginning eleventh grade. She could take the first two years of courses while still in high school, and soon thereafter be prepared to earn a living teaching Hebrew school. The Institute, established in 1905, had been given quite a boost in 1909 when Solomon Schechter, president of JTS, chose Mordecai Kaplan--already a rising star and later the founder of the Reconstructionist movement-- to lead it. By 1919, when Elsie Simonofsky applied, there was at the Institute an unprecedented gathering of fine minds in the service

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<sup>14</sup> Florence (Loewenstein) Marshall died on May 27, 1916, at 44. Louis Marshall's letter to Cyrus Adler and several other communal leaders establishing 'The Florence Marshall Memorial Fund' is in *Louis Marshall, Champion of Liberty: Selected papers and addresses*, ed. Charles Reznikoff (Philadelphia: JPS, 1957), Vol. II, 898-200. Here he reveals that he and his late wife had often discussed the pressing need for better Jewish education for girls. Writing in 1929, Benderly recalls that "At the graduation exercises of the Florence Marshall classes for girls, Mr. Marshall was always with us, and he was very much moved by what he used to see and hear at these exercises." "Louis Marshall and Jewish education: a personal appreciation," *JEd* 1:3 (1929): 146.

<sup>15</sup> EC passed on to her children the family story that when Fanny arrived with her daughters at Ellis Island, she told them to act shy and look at the ground so Bessie's mental disability would not be apparent. (She was the victim of a childhood illness.) Apparently Fanny was afraid--and with good reason--that the family would be refused entrance to the US if one member was perceived as sick or unfit.

of training a cadre of professional teachers to substantially improve the sorry state of American Jewish education.<sup>16</sup>

Kaplan had in the decade since his appointment upgraded the program, and gradually put together a small faculty of committed Hebraists, most of whom were followers of the Hebrew nationalism and cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am;<sup>17</sup> the faculty also included a few 'Benderly boys.' Hebrew, Bible, Jewish history, and religion, the last taught by Kaplan himself, were the core subjects. Course offerings gradually expanded to include pedagogy and methods of teaching Hebrew and of teaching Jewish history.

In 1916 the Institute found the 'downtown' home, which Kaplan and others deemed essential for involving the children of recent Russian immigrants, at the Hebrew Technical Institute for Boys at 36 Stuyvesant Street, in what is today the East Village. There were so many, he was convinced, who felt disaffected from the traditional faith of their parents, yet could be saved for Judaism and prepared to teach and inspire others if they were provided with an intellectually challenging, morally and spiritually demanding Jewish education based on modern pedagogical principles.

It was to this program that Elsie Simonofsky began journeying by subway several times a week from Brownsville. In the years before she enrolled, there was already a pipeline of talented young men moving on from Stone Avenue's Hebrew High School to the Teachers Institute, where they were groomed for careers in Jewish education. Elsie became part of this movement; as a girl she was both encouraged and subtly limited. Like Benderly, Mordecai Kaplan favored increased opportunities for education for young women, and by the time Elsie enrolled many of her classmates were women, yet the predisposition toward men, especially in leadership positions, was evident.

During the three years she was there, Teachers Institute was being pulled in many directions as to what its mission was and what its curriculum should be. Kaplan in May 1922 wrote in his journal that he was in the center of "a four-cornered fight" – the Orthodox accused him of turning out heretics, the Hebraists found graduates' Hebrew training insufficient in depth, the Jewish nationalists on the faculty resented any religious emphasis, while Cyrus Adler and the other trustees wanted more Jewish religion and ethics.<sup>18</sup> For students caught up in study with leading scholars and in the camaraderie of being pioneers in a relatively new profession, the surging conflicts may actually have been

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent and nuanced account of the development of Teachers Institute, see David Kaufman, "Jewish Education as a Civilization: A History of the Teachers Institute" in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Tradition Renewed: a history of the Jewish Theological Seminary* (New York: JTSA, 1997), 565-629.

<sup>17</sup> On Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856-1927) see especially Jacques Kornberg, ed., *At the Crossroads: Essays on Ahad Ha'Am* (Albany: SUNY, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Kaufman, "Jewish Education," 595. On the conflicts among Kaplan, Schechter, Benderly and various faculty about the TI program and rationale, see Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1991), 104-126.

stimulating. Moreover, Teachers Institute gave students a strong identification that, according to alumni reports, produced an almost family feeling.

The course of study was ambitious and rich. In her first year Elsie, only sixteen and in eleventh grade at public school, studied Pentateuch (Chumash), Prophets, Hebrew literature, post-Biblical Jewish history, and religion, the latter presumably taught by

Kaplan. Altogether it was surely a heady dose of Hebraic culture, the more so since most classes were taught in Hebrew. No doubt Elsie was called by her Hebrew name, Aliza, which she used throughout her life in Hebrew-speaking contexts. Her second and third year records show that she went on to two more years of Chumash, another course on the prophets and one on Hagiographa (Ketuvim), courses in Biblical, medieval and modern Jewish history, courses in Hebrew poetry and essays, a first course in Mishnah, methods courses for teaching Hebrew, Bible, and history, and in her third year, another religion course with Kaplan: Biblical Interpretation.

She completed her diploma in 1922, graduating with her age-mate and friend Azriel Eisenberg; both were nineteen, the two youngest of the twenty-four students in the graduating class. Later in life when Eisenberg became a leading teacher, thinker, and writer in Jewish education, and the Chomskys and Azriel and Rose Eisenberg were fast friends, Azriel would sometimes joke with Will that after all, he knew Elsie first.<sup>19</sup>

Eisenberg was not the only person Elsie met at Teachers Institute who became important to the Chomskys much later. Leo Honor, who was Registrar and taught pedagogy when she was a student, prepared in 1943 a thoughtful study of Jewish education in Philadelphia which was a catalyst for major growth and improvement at Gratz College; during their Philadelphia years, Honor and his wife Jennie became close friends of the Chomskys.<sup>20</sup> Noted scholar Zevi Scharfstein, who taught Hebrew and pedagogy, subsequently collaborated closely with William Chomsky for many years in editing the Hebrew-language educational journal *Sheviley HaHinuch* (Paths of Education).<sup>21</sup> In short, to a degree difficult to imagine today, at Teachers Institute Elsie entered a network of intertwining relationships that enclosed, stimulated and supported her--though

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<sup>19</sup> Telephone interview with Abraham Marthan, September 25, 1997. On Azriel Eisenberg (1903-1985) see the obituary in *JEd* 53:4 (Winter 1986), 4, *WWIAJ* 1980, and *Contemporary Authors*, NR 10.

<sup>20</sup> On Honor's report, see Jerry Kutnick, "Serving the Jewish Community, Pursuing Higher Jewish Learning: Gratz College in Historical Perspective," in Rela Mintz Geffen and Marsha Bryan Edelman, eds., *Freedom and Responsibility: Exploring the Challenges of Jewish Continuity* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1998), 321-348. On Leo Honor (1894-1956) see EJ and *Leo Lazarus Honor, Selected Writings*, ed. Abraham Gannes (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1965). There is a story which may be apocryphal that at TI, Honor once tried to discourage EC from going into teaching, and that the two had a good laugh about this incident on many later occasions.

<sup>21</sup> Scharfstein (1884-1972) edited *Sheviley HaHinuch* from 1940 to 1971; WC was assistant editor for much of that time. Scharfstein's extensive publications, all in Hebrew, include a 5-volume history of Jewish education and a book on methods of teaching Hebrew. For years he had a regular column in the Hebrew weekly *Hadoar* commenting on political and literary events. Scharfstein and WC had an occasional scholarly spat; see *JEd* 8:1 (January-March 1936): 54-55 and 13:1 (April 1941): 54-56.

they sometimes also frustrated and angered her-- throughout her life, and to whose educational ideals she remained committed.

In 1921-22, her third and last year at Teachers Institute, having already graduated from Eastern District High School, Elsie Simonofsky began teaching nine hours a week at Congregation Shaarei Tefila.<sup>22</sup> After receiving her teachers' diploma in June 1922 she returned to the familiar brick building at 386 Stone Avenue and plunged into an eighteen-hour a week teaching position at the Florence Marshall School #1 for Girls, which was housed at the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah.<sup>23</sup> Here she taught Hebrew, history, and current events to three classes of twenty-five students each, at a yearly salary of \$1200. Pearl (Friedman) Rochelson, who was Elsie's student at Stone Avenue, recalls, "I learned my Alef-Beys from her. I loved her...Everyone loved her. She was gentle and had a lovely voice."<sup>24</sup>

Within three years the talented and intense young woman became a sort of sub-principal, in charge of classes for the younger girls. She served under Samuel Dinin, a 'Benderly Boy' much influenced by Dewey, later a distinguished educator. Dinin remembers that Elsie Simonofsky was "a very intense person, very emotional--her face showed it...I knew her well...She was intelligent...gifted."<sup>25</sup> Noted artist and art educator Temima Gezari, who began teaching at Florence Marshall in 1925-26, recalls that "she [Elsie] was head teacher...very intelligent, cerebral, quiet. She had a sweetness and refinement about her."<sup>26</sup>

Stone Avenue and Teachers Institute together shaped the philosophy and practice of Jewish education that Elsie was later to bring to Gratz College and to her partnership with William Chomsky. Often in the life of a highly committed individual, a powerful experience in youth as part of an exciting, personally meaningful institution becomes as it were imprinted in the psyche, so that the individual later in life tries to re-create the essence of that institution--holding fast to what was special about it--in some other place and circumstance. Sometimes the re-creation works, sometimes not. Especially because she was both student

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<sup>22</sup> Abelow, in *History of Brooklyn Jewry*, mentions a congregation with this name at 75 Watkins Street.

<sup>23</sup> See above, note 14. Though housed at Stone Avenue, the school was administratively separate.

<sup>24</sup> Telephone interview, May 21, 1997. Rochelson further recalls "I went to Stone Avenue with a cousin. We would get a sour pickle on the way. It was a beautiful building, the supreme religious school in Brooklyn...She was sensitive, graceful, a lithe figure...She took us on a class picnic. At that time the area was still countrified. We went to where the hospital is now. I remember lolling on the grass and picking flowers." Thanks to Meri-Jane Rochelson for putting me in touch with her mother and with Lillian Kaplan.

<sup>25</sup> Telephone interview, July 27, 1997. Dinin (1902---) taught at TI until 1945, became Executive Director of the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education and later Dean of the University of Judaism.

<sup>26</sup> Telephone interview, June 27, 1997. In a retrospective article, Gezari writes, "When I was graduated from the Teachers Institute in 1925 and was chosen by Dr. Benderly to teach in one of his Prep Schools for Girls, I taught all subjects through art." *JEd* 51:2 (Fall 1983): 31. This remark suggests that Elsie Simonofsky too might have been hand-picked by Benderly to teach at Florence Marshall #1. On Gezari, see Daniel Gezari, ed. *The Art of Temima Gezari* (Rocky Point, NY: Studio Workshop Press, 1985); and the entry in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (New York: Routledge, 1997).

and teacher at Stone Avenue and because that place was already harmoniously linked with Teachers Institute, Elsie Simonofsky could take into herself an integrated vision, albeit contested from various ideological and religious perspectives, of a reformed and vitalized Jewish education.

While she taught at Florence Marshall, Elsie kept in touch with her Teachers Institute classmates through the social events of the Alumni Association, and kept on learning by enrolling in postgraduate courses. Instead of taking the whole postgraduate year program at once, as some students did, Elsie took selected courses. In 1922-23 she studied Medieval and Modern Hebrew Literature with noted scholar Hillel Bavli. In 1923-24 she ventured a little further afield to enroll in the Extension Program at Teachers College, Columbia University.<sup>27</sup> In 1925-26, Elsie once again signed up for postgraduate study at Teachers Institute, choosing History of Modern Hebrew Literature and requesting two other courses that required special permission.<sup>28</sup> During these years of teaching and further study she was, so far as is known, still living at home with her parents and with Sophie, Joe, and Dora, all still unmarried. The latest of four addresses in her Teachers Institute records<sup>29</sup> is 1113 Hopkinson Ave, a house which her parents bought jointly with her oldest sister Rose and her husband; Elsie may have used this as a permanent address during a period of transition.

Here we come to a dramatic break in Elsie Simonofsky's story. Sometime in 1926-27, she left her job, family, peer-group, and friends to move to Philadelphia. An air of mystery surrounds this period in her life. Her file in the Office of the Registrar at JTS contains a "To Whom it May Concern" letter dated December 10, 1926--a strange time for Hebrew teacher to be job-hunting-- affirming that she has satisfactorily completed her teacher's diploma and is "entitled to teach in Jewish religious schools."

Why might she have decided to relocate? One source attributes her departure to an unrequited romantic attachment; she felt she simply had to leave New York. Possibly family relationships became more strained. Whatever the reasons, she found a job teaching Hebrew school in South Philadelphia, at that time a bustling Jewish immigrant area, and at some point met William Chomsky, a promising scholar and educator in charge of the School of Observation and Practice, which

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<sup>27</sup> At this time an interactive relationship between the two institutions was already developing, whereby an elite group of 'Benderly Boys' would receive a TI diploma and a Teachers College degree. Several of these students went on at Columbia to write the first dissertations focusing on aspects of Jewish education in the US. Since EC took her Teachers College courses on a non-credit basis, unfortunately there is no record of what she chose.

<sup>28</sup> These were: Bible and Hebrew Commentaries, and Social Organization of the Classroom. It is not known whether she actually took these two courses. On her registration form, the latter course-- possibly one offered at Teachers College for which she needed special permission--has an asterisked note "If Dr. Benderly permits", further evidence of Benderly's involvement in guiding EC's career. See note 26 above. Thanks to David Kaufman for suggesting this interpretation.

<sup>29</sup> The other addresses are 308 Lott Avenue (1919-22), then 458 Royalston Avenue, and then 610 Snediker Avenue.

was both the Hebrew school for Congregation Mikveh Israel and a developing 'model school' closely associated with Gratz College.<sup>30</sup>

Little is known of their early relationship. Samuel Dinin recalls that it was he who introduced them on a train, either to Atlantic City or to or from Philadelphia, when he was on his way to an education conference. According to Dinin, William Chomsky was immediately drawn to Elsie, fell madly in love, pursued her and won her.<sup>31</sup> Shortly before the wedding, Chomsky took his fiancée to meet his family in Baltimore.<sup>32</sup> Elsie Simonofsky and William Chomsky were married on August 19, 1927,<sup>33</sup> at her family's home in Brooklyn. The couple honeymooned first in Atlantic City<sup>34</sup>, later in Canada.

In William Chomsky Elsie found a true life-partner. Also from an immigrant Yiddish-speaking family, also rebelling against a strictly Orthodox upbringing, also committed to a Hebrew-nationalist culture based on the Hebrew language, and also strongly influenced by Benderly, Dewey, and Ahad Ha'am, he shared many of her ideas and goals before the two ever met. Born in 1896 in Kopel, a town in Volhynia, Ukraine, he emigrated to Baltimore with his parents and two sisters in 1913, when he was seventeen. In only four years Ze'ev (who in the US became William) prepared himself to gain admission to Johns Hopkins; he graduated in 1921. He supported himself while at Hopkins by teaching Hebrew school, probably in that way coming under the influence of one or more Benderly protégés in Baltimore.<sup>35</sup>

After graduating, William Chomsky left Baltimore and his Orthodox family for Philadelphia. Within two years he completed an M.A. program in pedagogy at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>36</sup> In 1923 he was hired as 'superintendent' (principal) of the School of Observation and Practice, which was then going through a crisis of partial modernization. By the time he met Elsie Simonofsky, William had been

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<sup>30</sup> Relations between Gratz College and Mikveh Israel, a synagogue with a Sephardic base and a distinguished history, were complicated and changed over time. See Diane King's dissertation, "The History of Gratz College," Dropsie College, 1979, especially chapter 9, "The School of Observation and Practice," 243-296.

<sup>31</sup> Telephone interview with Samuel Dinin, July 27, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Telephone interview with WC's niece Esther (Naiman) Reich, July 29, 1997. She recalls that the family thought "she was perfect for him."

<sup>33</sup> Wedding announcement, *Philadelphia Jewish Times*, August 26, 1927, 9. The wedding announcement says that the bride was teaching at South Philadelphia Hebrew School, but I have been unable to identify the school more specifically. The first Jewish Center which started in South Philadelphia under the leadership of modernizing educator Ben Rosen did not open until 1928.

<sup>34</sup> Rose (Kotzin) Landy (1908- ), was a teenage Gratz student when she first met EC, at the time WC was courting her. She recalls traveling to Atlantic City with some other Gratz students to serenade the newlyweds. Landy and EC subsequently became lifelong friends. Landy received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1929, and a Penn law degree in 1932. She and her husband, prominent attorney Samuel Landy, were on the board at Gratz and very active in the Histadrut and other Zionist causes.

<sup>35</sup> On William Chomsky see EJ; Getzel Kressel, *Leksikon I*, 772-3; and *Contemporary Authors* 77-80. According to the recollections of Hymen Saye in *Generations*, December 1980, p. 29, he taught at the Baltimore Talmud Torah. He took courses from 1915-17 at Baltimore City College before applying to Hopkins, and apparently considered becoming a physician. Hamburger Archives, Johns Hopkins.

<sup>36</sup> University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

through an exhilarating yet grueling period of trying to create a model Hebrew school based on the progressive principles he espoused with a faculty that was often balky, parents who were often unreceptive, and very little money.<sup>37</sup> He not only married a woman whom he loved, but one who could be a full partner in his educational efforts, for she had the best Hebraist training available and several years' teaching and administrative experience at a premier institution. The two had complementary personalities. Will was affable, steady, low-key; Elsie intense, highly nervous, emotional.

Yet although over decades, William and Elsie Chomsky together gradually became anchors of the Hebraist community in Philadelphia and what a former student called 'the soul of Gratz', their careers did not develop in the same way. Will would soon have a Ph.D from Dropsie;<sup>38</sup> Elsie had only her teacher's diploma. Notwithstanding their commitment to progressive education, the couple's household, probably from the start and certainly in their later years, was organized in a quite East European traditional fashion: Elsie managed everything in their day-to-day life, leaving Will free to read, study, teach, and write. She admired her husband's intellectual gifts and achievements immensely.

In the spring of 1928 Elsie realized that she was pregnant. Deeply concerned about the family's financial future, Will wrote a fairly desperate-sounding letter to prominent Gratz College trustee Cyrus Adler asking for a raise, "as my wife soon will have to stop working..."<sup>39</sup> Adler's written reply was not encouraging, but somehow the situation must have been adjusted, as Will remained at Gratz. Their son Noam was born on December 7, 1928. After not teaching during his infancy, in 1930-31 Elsie became a teacher at the School of Observation and Practice (SOOP), of which William Chomsky was superintendent.<sup>40</sup> Thus began four decades of working at the same institution as her husband, yet with his always the higher status. As Will moved upward and became Chairman of the Faculty, she replaced him as principal of SOOP.<sup>41</sup> This position, which she held until her retirement, was crucial for her professional development and her powerful influence on Jewish education in Philadelphia, and is probably how she is most often remembered.

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<sup>37</sup> Then and in subsequent years, WC was often caught in the ongoing tug-of-war between the congregation of Mikveh Israel and the Gratz faculty. See King's dissertation.

<sup>38</sup> Dropsie College of Hebrew and Cognate Learning, established in 1909 in Philadelphia, was a graduate institution dedicated to Jewish and related learning. *EJ*.

<sup>39</sup> Cyrus Adler papers, Center for Judaic Studies, William Chomsky folders, Box 26, FF4. Thanks to Arthur Kiron for locating this letter and other material in the Chomsky folders for me. WC had earlier written several other pleading letters to Adler; see quotations from his letters of December 8, 1925, and April 7, 1926, in Diane King's dissertation, "A History of Gratz College", 283-284.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, the 1930-31 Gratz College Register indicates that in that year, in addition to SOOP at Mikveh Israel, there was an additional branch called the Hebrew Education Society School of Observation and Practice of Gratz College, which met in the HES building at 1529 North Seventh Street. It was there that EC initially taught. Register, 18-21, Rare Book Room, Gratz College.

<sup>41</sup> It has not been possible, despite extensive inquiries, to ascertain just when EC officially became principal of SOOP. Probably she acted as de facto principal--and was so perceived--for some years while she was still officially 'critic teacher' there and WC the titular head. The difficulty in fixing a date reflects not only the informality of Gratz administrative arrangements and the paucity of archival materials for the relevant decades, but the submersion/merging of EC's career and achievements within the institution.

From the time Noam was an infant, the Chomskys began spending summers at the New Jersey shore; their friend Rose Eisenberg, newly married to Azriel, recalls visiting them there when Noam was in his high chair.<sup>42</sup> Each summer for a number of years the couple would rent a house at Wildwood Crest, where a cluster of Conservative rabbis and other Jewishly involved friends and associates also summered, and enjoy the seaside. Will was all his adult life an avid swimmer who loved the ocean; he also took time every day at Wildwood to study and write. Elsie, who did not swim and indeed feared the water, spent time on the beach. She had cut her long brown curly hair since she became a mother; she was slim, wiry, and tan.

She loved to invite family and friends for short and long periods while she and Will were there for family summers. Her niece Esther (Naiman) Reich, who spent seven entire summers there beginning in 1930, when she was ten, experienced Elsie as “a second mother”. She recalls that Will and Elsie and their friends “would all get together and sing and frolic. They would sing Hebrew songs and even have discussions on Zionism. People were always coming and going.” Elsie’s mother, a little woman in a shaitl, visited during one of the early summers.<sup>43</sup> And an invitation to the shore was a way Elsie could help her siblings in New York by taking one of their children; this she did readily.

For in 1929 the stock market crashed and the Great Depression set in. Though there was concern and belt-tightening at already under-financed Gratz College, Elsie’s family, struggling with poverty and unemployment in New York, considered her well off, as Will and she both had regular employment throughout the thirties and still managed summers at the shore. But the New York situation was bleak. The Simonofskys lost their Brownsville home when it was repossessed by the bank because they couldn’t meet the mortgage payments. Not long thereafter Elsie’s father died. Sophie, Joe, and Dora, all still unmarried, lived for a time together with their mother, who had suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed; they were barely scraping by. For several years Anna and her husband, both out of work, also moved into that household with their two sons. Elsie did what she could.

Meanwhile the Chomskys’ second son, David, was born on June 23, 1934, at about the time Noam was old enough to start elementary school. Will and Elsie sent Noam, and later David, to the Oak Lane Country Day School (OLCD), a nearby progressive and lively K-8 private school connected with Temple University. Its students were for the most part Jewish, but from families more assimilated and less concerned with Jewish learning than theirs. Because both

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<sup>42</sup> Telephone interview with Rose Eisenberg, June 29, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Telephone interview with Esther Reich, July 29, 1997. Esther was the daughter of Will’s sister Fanny. Though her Baltimore family was extremely Orthodox, Esther’s mother was willing to let her spend summers with her quite un-Orthodox brother Will and his wife, as she felt it was still a strong Jewish environment for her daughter.

Noam and David attended, she had a fifteen-year relationship with the school, which influenced her sons, especially Noam, greatly.<sup>44</sup>

After school, Noam often didn't go directly home because both his parents were at work, teaching Hebrew school. Instead, he went home with his best friend and classmate, Bob Teeters, whose family lived across the street from OLCD. The two boys would amuse themselves and listen to 'Jack Armstrong' and other radio serials till about 6:30, when

Will, or Will and Elsie, would pick Noam up. The boys had occasional 'sleepovers' at one another's houses, and the Chomskys developed a warm friendship with Bob's Protestant parents, Temple University criminologist Robert Teeters and his wife Ruth Schendel; the two couples enjoyed occasional dinners in one another's homes.<sup>45</sup> This friendship was to have a consequence many years later that neither couple could have imagined.

During these years Elsie Chomsky was raising her children, working full-time and running the household so that Will was free to write and study. She did have live-in help for Noam and David when they were small, usually black women, for such help cost very little during the nineteen-thirties; otherwise she ran the household herself. She laid out Will's clothes in the morning, made sure his lunch was ready even if she wouldn't be there, paid the bills, and kept track of the family's finances. Once the children no longer needed live-ins, she completely took over the kitchen as well. She would literally let neither her husband nor her sons enter it. The Chomskys entertained often, as Elsie loved to have people over for dinner parties, and she did all the work for these occasions herself. After renting in several locations, the Chomskys somehow managed in the late nineteen-thirties to buy the home on 6417 Fairhill street where they lived the rest of their lives.<sup>46</sup> It was a simple, plain semi-detached house in the residential neighborhood of East Oak Lane, above Olney Avenue.

Gradually the situation of Elsie's siblings improved. Sophie was married late to a very unusual man, Milton Kraus; legally blind, he had a newsstand on 72nd St and Broadway and also became a lay analyst. Milton was a major influence on Noam.<sup>47</sup> Sophie and Milton's comfortable apartment on Riverside Drive--attained after many years in tiny quarters while he built up his practice--was a center for animated political discussion from a range of viewpoints on the left and a gathering place for the Simonofsky clan. Thanksgivings there were memorable, full of loud, excited political talk. Joe, also late to marry, was happy with his wife Sylvia. Though a teacher by profession, his real passion was classical music; he

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<sup>44</sup> For Noam Chomsky's assessment of OLCD, see Robert Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 15-16.

<sup>45</sup> Telephone interview with Robert Teeters, July 2, 1997. Interview with Noam Chomsky, April 29, 1997.

<sup>46</sup> According to alumni listings in TI Registers and letters to and from WC in the Adler papers, the couple's other addresses in Philadelphia included 6236 North Broad St. (1928), 6525 9th Street (1932, 1935), and 6421 N. Fairhill (1935). These are all in the same East Oak Lane neighborhood, the last just a few doors from the house they eventually bought. The 6417 address first appears in 1937, but the Chomskys may have rented the house for a while before buying it.

<sup>47</sup> Barsky, 23-24.

reveled in repeated successful appearances on the WQXR music quiz, and in being able to identify conductors and soloists in myriad recorded performances. Dora found a permanent friend, Sonya, also a seamstress, who though not actually a relative was in practice another aunt for Noam and David. The enrichment of her siblings' lives, which she and Will shared through frequent visits to New York, enriched Elsie's also.

The Chomskys' children were growing up and were ready for summer experiences beyond Wildwood. In 1943 Will and Elsie sent Noam to the very first summer of Camp Massad, a Hebrew-language overnight camp in the Pocono mountains near Philadelphia, which audaciously started up amid the flames and ashes of World War II and the Holocaust; they and other Hebraists in their circle sent their children in subsequent summers as well. Alvin Schiff, a counselor in those early Massad years, knew Will and Elsie as Noam's parents who often visited camp. Though he was only a few years older than their son, they became his friends and treated him as an equal in their lively discussions. "Elsie was like a magnet."<sup>48</sup> Massad was part of an energetic Hebrew camping movement that emphasized daily, natural use of Hebrew, drama and other arts, integration of Shabbat and other observances with camp life, and Zionism.<sup>49</sup> Since David later attended for many summers as well, Elsie had a long-standing parent involvement--as she did with OLC--with an institution whose ideals were close to her heart.

The year before the Chomskys married, an organization was founded which was to become the professional 'home' of the group of Jewish educators who constituted Will and Elsie's professional community. The National Council of Jewish Education (NCJE) held its founding meeting in Cleveland in 1926, and yearly conferences thereafter; in 1929 NCJE's journal, *Jewish Education*, first appeared. The blooming and passing of several generations of educators can be traced in its many volumes: through obituaries and special memorial issues as members of the founding generation pass on, tributes to leading figures as they reach advanced ages, gloom-and-doom assessments of Jewish education mixed with reports of hopeful experimental projects, and endless surveys.

For decades Will published regularly in *Jewish Education*. He was often on its editorial board, his books were reviewed as they appeared, and he carried on

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<sup>48</sup> Telephone interview with Alvin Schiff, July 20, 1997. When Schiff (1926- ) much later was supervisor of teacher training at Yeshiva University, he and EC became colleagues, often telephoning one another for advice and support and exchanging ideas. "She was astute, very careful in terms of guiding students."

<sup>49</sup> Massad began in 1941 as a day camp; 1943 was its first 'overnight' summer. On the Hebrew camping movement of the 40s and 50s, which was presaged by Benderly's Camp Achvah (1926), see Walter Ackerman, "A World Apart: Hebrew Teachers Colleges and Hebrew-Speaking Camps", in Alan Mintz, ed., *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1993), 105-128. Hebrew-language camps such as Massad, Ramah, and Yavneh were only part of a large, politically and linguistically varied panoply of Jewish camps. See Meir Ben-Horin, 'Jewish Educational Camps,' in Judah Pilch, ed., *History of Jewish Education in the United States* (New York: American Association for Jewish Education, 1969), 100-104. See also two special issues of *JEd* which focus on camping: 17:3 and 36:2.

vigorous controversies in its pages with other educators about the best methods of teaching Hebrew. Though Elsie was far less prominent and less visible, she too found an intermittent voice there. And the yearly NCJE conferences, always in late May or early June, were an occasion for the Chomskys to share ideas and to socialize with old friends. In the evenings, after all the sessions, there was often a wonderful 'kumsitz' -- everyone would sit in an informal circle while Alexander Dushkin, Emanuel Gamoran, Judah Pilch and other leading educators called out "I'll do you one better!" and told story after story, trying to outdo one another amid general laughter and some singing.<sup>50</sup>

Elsie made her debut in *Jewish Education* in 1933 with an article entitled, "Experience with a Holiday Program as a Center of Interest in the Curriculum."<sup>51</sup> It is the work of a relatively young, excited, and impatient teacher brimming with ideas, thrilled when the children respond and deeply self-critical when they do not, and explicitly critical of the blandness and irrelevance of most Hebrew school holiday performances. She strenuously advocates making the creation of such performances a focus of the regular curriculum, and describes the process by which her second-year class of eight-to-eleven year olds composed a Purim play using vocabulary and phrases from their Hebrew text:

"The first response to my suggestion was rather indifferent. The children assured me that the task was too great for them to cope with...I made no effort to minimize the difficulty of the work, but, at the same time, I convinced them that only such tasks were worthy of an intelligent and ambitious group. They were quite easily persuaded that it was not wise to shirk a task because of its difficulty and to allow their inherent capabilities to suffer because of diffidence and timidity. The work began, and from its inception to the very last stage it was marked by a vivid interest, by unreserved cooperation from almost the entire class, by determination and persistence which no other activity had ever elicited."

The author explains carefully how she led the students to discover that phrases in their Hebrew text could be adapted to the play-in-progress, and how the drama itself stimulated their learning of new vocabulary and their greater comfort with certain grammatical constructions. "The effect on the parents was electrifying.

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<sup>50</sup> Telephone interview with Alvin Schiff, July 20, 1997. Schiff was at kumsitzes in the fifties, and also heard tales about the even livelier gatherings of earlier years. He recalls that EC was one of the few wives who often came to the kumsitzes.

Dushkin and Gamoran were 'Benderly Boys.' Dushkin (1890-1976) wrote his dissertation, "Jewish Education in New York City," at Columbia under John Dewey. See EJ, the special issue of *JEd* celebrating Dushkin's 80th birthday (41: 1-2, Fall 1971), and his memoir, *Living Bridges* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975). Gamoran (1895-1962), a very early graduate of the TI (1913), was Education Director of the UAHC and wrote or edited many books for young people. *Who was Who in America* 4. Pilch (1902-86) was Executive Director of the American Association for Jewish Education and graduate dean of the University of Judaism. *Contemporary Authors* NR 6.

<sup>51</sup> *JEd* 5:2 (1933): 95-100. Coincidentally, this issue of *JEd* included a 'first' for WC also: the text of the first talk he had given at an NCJE conference, held the previous year in Philadelphia: "The Curriculum for the New Jewish Weekday School" (22-31).

They felt intuitively that this was a vital expression of the creative urges of the children and not a studied and mechanical repetition of lines.”<sup>52</sup>

Elsie published no other article in *Jewish Education* about her work until 1949. Raising two sons, managing a complicated household, maintaining close relationships with her family in New York and with friends, and teaching a full schedule at Gratz may have precluded writing. Or perhaps she simply was not interested in publishing and preferred to make her impact a personal one, in the classroom and through the training and supervision of student teachers. Self-effacing, overshadowed by her husband whose prestige as a scholar-educator was growing--though Will was himself modest and not at all fame-hungry---she worked steadily and with deep commitment in a mode that was probably not valued in the same way as purely scholarly attainments.

With the rise of Hitler and a consequent wave of new immigrants escaping persecution and potential annihilation, the situation at Gratz assumed increased intensity. Hebraists everywhere clung to and elevated their task as a sacred one of preservation and revival. The Chomskys and their circle struggled on through World War II, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Strengthened and made more purposeful by crisis, buoyed by increased support and an influx of new talent, Gratz College in the late forties and fifties had what one student called its ‘glory days’, when it was the center of Hebrew-nationalist culture in Philadelphia, with the Chomskys at the heart of the institution.

Elsie Simonofsky Chomsky was fortunate to be part of the ‘glory days’ of not one but three institutions. She attended and subsequently taught at the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah in its heyday; she studied at the Teachers Institute in its prime. The excitement and pedagogical innovation of those two institutions she could take into herself and carry with her to Gratz College, where as the beloved wife of one of its leading scholars who was also its major academic administrator, she was an ‘insider.’ Yet as a woman, and at Gratz as a woman without a college degree, her good fortune had its other side. Perhaps a not-always-visible bitter streak in her personality was partly due to this combination of being caught up in a profoundly moving venture, but also marginalized.

The following interesting entries appear in the extensive “Educational News and Notes” section of *Jewish Education* in 1947:

“Mrs. ELSIE CHOMSKY has been invited to join the faculty of Gratz College, Philadelphia. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, she is charged with extra-curricular activities at the College.

Dr. WILLIAM CHOMSKY has been appointed to the newly created position of Chairman of the Faculty of Gratz College”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 97-98, 100.

<sup>53</sup> *JEd* 21:1 (1947): 95.

Did William Chomsky, in his new role as faculty chairman, facilitate his wife's being actually appointed to the faculty after her eighteen years of teaching and supervising? Whatever story may lie behind these concurrent announcements is probably by now unretrievable, but they point to a problem: without even a bachelor's degree, Elsie Chomsky was not eligible by the accepted standards of the day to teach at the college level. 'Gratz College' was actually a cluster of programs: She could be principal of its teacher-training arm, SOOP; she could teach in Gratz's preparatory program for high school students and its three-year program to prepare Sunday-school teachers for Reform congregations; and by stretching a point she could and did teach pedagogy to students at Gratz College in order to better prepare them to teach Hebrew school. But despite any title she may have been granted after 1949,<sup>54</sup> she never did teach core subjects such as Hebrew and Bible to students officially enrolled in Gratz College.

One may reasonably wonder why Elsie Chomsky did not in adulthood go back to school like her friend Gabrielle Auspitz, graduate of a Hebrew *gymnasium* in Czechoslovakia and holder of a Czech teacher's diploma, who found that the lack of an American college degree repeatedly frustrated her advancement in the field of Jewish education.<sup>55</sup> Probably Elsie felt ambivalence and some anger on the issue of academic degrees, the same ambivalence that would not allow her to march each year in the colorful, stately Gratz commencement procession. On the one hand she knew she was just as intelligent and competent as the rabbis and academics who surrounded her; indeed, she felt her superiority to some, and at times ridiculed their pomposity in the privacy of her home.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the tangible importance of advanced degrees in achieving recognition was everywhere manifest in her Hebraist world. One can speculate that pride and self-acceptance struggled with resentment in such a way that she neither pursued a bachelor's or master's degree nor felt completely happy without one.

Though technically she did not teach Gratz College students, Elsie Chomsky did have a deep involvement with many of them through her work with Ivriah, a lively group that met one Sunday evening a month for chorus, drama, Israeli dancing and Hebrew conversation, combined with dinner prepared and served by parent volunteers. Committed since her first teaching years to what we would now call "integrated arts" as a way of fostering community and excitement about Hebrew, she directed dramatic productions each year, often preparing the Hebrew scripts and songs herself or with some assistance. To these performances she brought

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<sup>54</sup> In the Gratz College Registers [catalogs] of 1946-47 and 1948-49, her title is 'Critic Teacher' at the School of Observation and Practice, of which WC is listed as supervisor; then there is a gap in the collection of Registers until 1962. From then until 1970 EC is "Assistant Professor of Education and Hebrew" and also (sometimes listed separately) "Coordinator of Student Activities." In 1971 she becomes "Emeritus Assistant Professor...." Records in Rare Book Room, Tuttleman Library, Gratz College.

<sup>55</sup> Gabrielle (Hartstein) Auspitz Labson (1914-- ) was in the first graduating class of the Hebrew gymnasium in Munkacs, which her family was instrumental in founding. She came to the US in 1940. Auspitz Labson completed an MA in education at St. Joseph's College and an MA in Hebrew Literature at Gratz. She eventually became Deputy Director of the Board of Jewish Education in San Diego.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Noam Chomsky, cited above.

not only her Benderly-influenced training, but her not inconsiderable skill as a musician.<sup>57</sup> The whole experience of working on and performing these productions was a vital part of the experience of many Gratz students.

One of the most elaborate of these productions was in 1947, a year of turbulence and hope for Jews throughout the world as hopes for a Jewish state in the aftermath of the Holocaust were alternately raised and crushed. "Hevele Mashiah,"<sup>58</sup> written and directed by Elsie with the help of her son Noam and his close friend Hillel Pitlik, son of another Gratz Hebraist couple, featured dancers, a chorus, and a series of allegorical-political scenes showing Jewish refugees yearning to go to the Land of Israel, determined to get there despite being halted by the British.

Of Elsie's method and manner the main dancer, Ryda (Dwarys) Rose, recalls, "She saw what was a strength in each of us and brought it out...She took us and made us feel good and worked us...She looked like a standoffish cool type but she wasn't. I saw the emotional side because she liked me, and I did a lot of work for her."<sup>59</sup>

By this time Noam had already demonstrated the remarkable intellectual prowess that would later make him a world-renowned linguistics scholar and public intellectual. At eighteen, his views about a Jewish state were already different from those of most of his peers, but he was still expressing them within the context of Gratz and his Hebraist upbringing. An article he wrote in Hebrew for the spring 1947 issue of the Gratz student publication, *HaMitorer* [The Awakener] prefigures the later direction of his thought. He argues on economic and political grounds against accepting the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, as was currently being proposed by the UN Commission, and for a single bi-national state: "1. Economic control is far more important than political control. 2. We can't attain economic control--that is to say, the possibility of flourishing

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<sup>57</sup> Somehow, possibly at Brownsville's Hebrew Education Society, which offered free lessons, EC learned to play the piano fairly well. Her niece Florence Heilner recalls that when EC visited New York after her marriage, she would often play the piano which the family by then owned, and even gave Florence's sister Selma piano lessons. For her husband and sons she used to play at family songfests, when they would gather round the baby grand that was one of the Chomskys' few 'luxuries.'

<sup>58</sup> The title refers to a traditional Jewish belief that the coming of the Messiah will be preceded by a period of disaster and destruction; in secular Zionist terms, this translates into the horror of the Holocaust being followed by a triumphant Jewish state. "Hevele Mashiah" was performed for an audience of hundreds at Temple Emanuel on April 17, 1947. Thanks to Ryda Rose for providing me with the program. Unfortunately no programs or scripts were preserved at Gratz from the many Ivriah dramatic presentations EC direct Sed. Another play-with-songs that is warmly remembered was about proto-Zionist Mordecai Emanuel Noah, another was about Joseph and his coat of many colors, and yet another portrayed characters from Sholom Aleichem's stories. EC wrote and directed "Birth of a Vision" as part of a special Hebrew Arts evening celebrating the Herzl centenary on May 15, 1960. *The Jewish Exponent*, May 13, 1960, clipping file, Rare Book Room, Gratz College. And she adapted and directed the play "Three Pillars" for the annual Hebrew Arts evening on May 7, 1961. "What's New at Gratz College," April 1961.

<sup>59</sup> Telephone interview with Ryda Rose, August 28, 1997. Ryda had trained at Penn with Malvina Taiz, a Martha Graham student, and was given the task of preparing the other dancers.

and developing--in a partitioned land.” Yet he speaks throughout the essay as “we” and tries to persuade from within the community.<sup>60</sup>

While Noam was flexing his intellectual muscles, in the turbulent 1940s Elsie was gradually becoming more visible professionally through the publication of materials for young people studying Hebrew. She had begun this role quite early, preparing the exercise books for all three of William Chomsky’s basic Hebrew language series, *Sippuri*, in the nineteen-thirties. These were now revised and republished several times for a wider audience.<sup>61</sup> She also prepared exercises for *Hagenu Umoadanu*, a young people’s book about the Jewish holidays and festivals, which he edited and partly wrote, and which was intended for students at a more advanced level than *Sippuri*.<sup>62</sup>

In 1946 William Chomsky’s *How to Teach Hebrew in the Elementary Grades*, a handbook that combines exhortation, practical suggestions, and explication of various approaches to teaching reading, appeared.<sup>63</sup> It certainly cannot be assumed, especially considering the Chomskys’ shared goals and pedagogy, that William Chomsky prepared the texts of *Sippuri* and *Hagenu Umoadanu* and of the teacher’s handbook all by himself and that Elsie limited herself to the workbooks. As one former student wrote, “...one’s impression was that they [the Hebrew texts and the pedagogical works] were as much hers as his...I suspect that her contribution was significant and that Will sought out her input.”<sup>64</sup>

From this period there is one example of actual co-authorship: a children’s life of Maimonides.<sup>65</sup> Elsie Chomsky also prepared on her own a collection of eight Hebrew plays, *Mahazot*.<sup>66</sup>

During the period when Israel became a state, she published two books for young people. Will was editing a series, ‘Sifriat Oneg’ [Books for Pleasure], in which writers attempted to create absorbing stories using a limited vocabulary, so that children and young adults with limited Hebrew could read them on their own.

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<sup>60</sup> P. 7; the essay is on pp. 5-9. Translation by Shalom Hertz. Thanks to Hayim Sheynin for calling this essay to my attention.

<sup>61</sup> Initial publication of *Sippuri*, which retells selected episodes from Genesis in simple Hebrew using the most-often-repeated Biblical words as basic vocabulary, was by the Associated Talmud Torahs of Philadelphia. Volume II, published in 1932, has an introduction by WC’s mentor and friend Ben Rosen stating that “The Pupil’s Practice Book, as well as a series of tests accompanying this textbook, are the work of Mrs. Elsie Chomsky.” However, she is not always given credit when the series is mentioned or advertised in *JEd*. *Sippuri* was revised and republished several times; a later edition was published in 1948 by Gratz College, with EC’s revised workbook following in 1949. *JEd* 21:1 (1949): 99.

<sup>62</sup> Histadruth Ivrit, New York, 1945. Publication of her workbook is noted in *JEd* 17:3 (June 1946): 62, but I have been unable to locate a copy.

<sup>63</sup> United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education. The chapter bibliographies clearly indicate WC’s enthusiasm for Dewey and his awareness of major theories and methods of teaching reading then current in US pedagogy--Gates, etc.

<sup>64</sup> E-mail from Taffy (Baker) Sassoon, October 22, 1997.

<sup>65</sup> *Rabi Moshe ben Maimon: Biografia* (Baltimore: Bureau of Jewish Education, 1944), in the series Sifriah LaNoar, Sidra Bet. I have not yet been able to locate a copy of this book or of *Mahazot* [see below].

<sup>66</sup> *Mahazot (Eight Hebrew Plays)* (Philadelphia: Council on Jewish Education, 1947).

Elsie wrote the fourth in the series, *Yigael Hashomer* [Yigael the Watchman], a somber adventure tale with Jewish victory coming at a price of lives lost. The advertisement at the time of publication states: "The story deals with the heroic adventures of one of the founders of the Haganah in Israel, his victorious struggle against Arab marauders, and the founding of the settlement Merhaviah."<sup>67</sup> She also wrote, as part of another series for young readers, *Em HaShomrim* [Mother of the Watchmen], a similar fictionalized account of heroic, at times fatal exploits by Zionist youth in Mandatory Palestine.<sup>68</sup> These young people's books with their stereotyped malevolent Arabs are difficult to read empathically in today's very different climate, but one must consider the historical and emotional context in which they were written.

In 1949 Elsie Chomsky for the first time read a paper at the annual NCTE conference; it was the opening paper in a symposium on supervision. The whole group of papers was subsequently published in *Jewish Education* with an editorial note that this symposium was one of the outstandingly important events of the conference.<sup>69</sup> The paper, "Three Years of Experience with a Consultation Program," is the only sustained exposition of Elsie Chomsky's mature thought about her work with teachers, and also opens a window on the extensive consultation she did outside of Gratz through the Philadelphia Council on Jewish Education. Though she reports a number of heartening interactions with teachers and administrators and striking, substantive improvements, she is frank in her severe critique of congregational schools with their constant teacher turnover and their suspicion of 'outsiders' observing.<sup>70</sup>

"...teachers were uneasy, suspicious, and sometimes even hostile...We found disillusioned Hebraists...secular-school teachers for whom Jewish teaching was supplementary, marginal and worthwhile only as a source of additional income and young Gratz College students who, while potentially good material, were too busy pursuing their own education....In short, we found few real teachers, mostly only individuals holding teaching jobs."<sup>71</sup>

Elsie here identifies the Achilles' heel of Benderly's glorious vision for Jewish education in America, and no doubt the source of much of her frustration. In an

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<sup>67</sup> (New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1949). A total of 14 books appeared in the series. The advertisement is from *JEd* 20:3 (Summer 1949), inside back cover.

<sup>68</sup> *Em HaShomrim, MiRishone HaHaganah b'Eretz Yisrael* (New York: Histadrut Ivrit, 1948). The story opens in Baku, where two brothers learn about labor organizing through the 1904-05 unrest and strike there. Anti-Semitic violence leads them and their mother to emigrate to Palestine. The older brother is killed by Arabs, and the mother urges the younger one to seek revenge.

<sup>69</sup> *JEd* 21:2 (1950): 17-22, 64.

<sup>70</sup> For the labyrinthine organizational politics behind EC's account, see Abraham Gannes's article, "The Philadelphia Council on Jewish Education," *JEd* 30: 2 (Winter 1960): 17-34. Apparently supervision/consultation became her niche of visibility at NCTE, for according to a summary of proceedings, she led off another panel on the subject at the 1955 conference. *JEd* 26:3 (1955): 57.

EC did not publish again in *JEd* except for two brief book reviews of Hebrew stories for young people: *Sippurim Yafim* by H. A. Friedland, reviewed in *JEd* 30:2 (Winter 1960): 70, and *Megillot Yam Hamelach* by Azriel Eisenberg, reviewed in *JEd* 30:3 (Spring 1960): 52. She was elected to one three-year term on the NCJE Board, 1961-64. *JEd* 32:1 (Fall 1965): 45.

<sup>71</sup> "Three Years," *JEd* 21:2, 18.

American society increasingly open to Jews, gifted, dedicated Hebrew-school teachers who would make a career of teaching late-afternoon, evening and Sunday classes for students already carrying a full public-school courseload were a rare species. In the congregational schools that are the focus of her paper, she was often appalled by the inadequacies of the staff. But even Gratz's School of Observation and Practice, with its carefully nurtured student teachers, held no model solution to the personnel problem; most of the bright, talented young people who taught there either went on to become rabbis, academics in Jewish studies, or Jewish communal leaders in the United States, or made Aliya, or went into completely different professional fields.<sup>72</sup>

Yet she labored at SOOP with highly focused energy, and her discussion of consultation indirectly reflects her wealth of experience there. As previously indicated, she had taken over the principalship from her husband and for decades made it very much her own.<sup>73</sup>

She hand-picked the students who were to teach at the school--which they referred to by its acronym SOOP or as 'Little Gratz.'--from among those who studied pedagogy with her, and took with utmost seriousness the task of critiquing their work and producing a cadre of excellent teachers---reproducing, in her own more modest circle, the efforts of Samson Benderly in her own youth. She also traveled all over Philadelphia, visiting and critiquing other Gratz students who were teaching in afternoon congregational schools.

Successful supervision of teachers is a peculiarly improvisational art that leaves behind no syllabi or course notes. The interaction is a subtle one, intended to affect future performance by initiating a sort of distanced yet searching self-reflection that is ongoing.

Elsie Chomsky was a memorable, sometimes intimidating, often superb supervisor. One former student recalls that "She had a particular way of taking apart what you had done and reconstructing you...She didn't leave you devastated, she left you reconstructed."<sup>74</sup> Another writes: "On the day she visited, you had to be at your best, or you would receive a detailed written critique of your shortcomings. Yet she was masterly at providing constructive criticism, presenting it in a fashion that studiously avoided belittling the recipient."<sup>75</sup>

Elsie Chomsky taught her own classes in modern Hebrew and pedagogy with the same intensity and thoroughness that permeated her supervision. Her former students often recall her as 'serious', 'a taskmaster.' Some found her intensity 'frightening' while to others it was inspiring, affecting their future study plans and

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<sup>72</sup> Benderly had enormous faith in American public education. The numerous programs he envisioned, put into practice, and inspired were all supplementary schools, not separate Jewish schools. But the problem remains: how to give significant professional status and adequate pay to those who teach there?

<sup>73</sup> EC was principal of SOOP at four different locations. Relations with Mikveh Israel were ended in 1955; while the new Gratz campus near Olney Avenue was being planned and constructed, SOOP functioned for four years at the congregational school of Beth Shalom, then moved to Ahavath Israel's school until the new campus opened in 1962. These successive moves can not have been administratively easy.

<sup>74</sup> Telephone interview with Pesach Sobol, May 11, 1997.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Edward L. Hoffman, October 27, 1997.

career choices. She was 'firm in a kind way,' demanding but not stifling of fun or initiative. Indeed, my own recollection of her modern Hebrew class is that we had an often uproarious time while she was serious--except for occasional sallies into pointed irony.<sup>76</sup> The impression she left was of one whose ideals were right there in the details of her daily work.

Since both were on academic year schedules, the Chomskys could plan not only summers at the shore but also, as the children grew and their own positions became a little more secure, a modest amount of summer travel. In the summer of 1950, they took a much longer and long-awaited trip. With their sixteen-year-old son David, they went to Europe and Israel. The three Chomskys spent about a week each in London, Paris, and Rome, and the rest of the summer in Israel, seeing the country so often envisioned and spending time on a kibbutz. From then on Will and Elsie often went to Israel for a few weeks in the summer; friends remember them staying in Jerusalem at Will's beloved President Hotel, where he could enjoy the pool.

With their dear friends Abraham and Miriam Gannes, they took a number of vacation trips which Gannes recalled in an article for *Sheviley HaHinuch*, written after William Chomsky's death in 1977; his memories reveal a side of the Chomskys not often visible to their students:

"The four of us went on many trips during the summers, to Canada, to Cape Cod and elsewhere. Since we all traveled in one car, we had a unique opportunity to get to know each other and to deepen our friendship. I would like to mention several episodes from these trips which typify Ze'ev and Aliza. These events are engraved in my heart. Chomsky had a sweet voice and loved folk songs and Hasidic songs. In the summer of 1953 we participated in a teachers' seminar in Canada. We learned two jolly songs, "The Kotzker Rebbe", and "Zoll Zein Shalom" [Let There be Peace]. All the way home, Ze'ev and I did not stop singing those songs. Our wives begged us to stop but to no avail, until the two stopped up their ears....

"Chomsky was a romantic, emotional, sentimental man. This side of him revealed itself when we visited 'Evangeline country' in Canada. It turned out that Ze'ev and Aliza had spent their honeymoon in that same area. When we arrived, Chomsky could not rest. He and Aliza were very excited and the four of us walked in the streets of the town to see all the places that they remembered, and to enjoy the stunning scenery. Until very late that night we read aloud Longfellow's famous poem "Evangeline". The next morning we went into the hotel where they had stayed twenty-five years ago. Chomsky went to the desk and was startled --was the person standing behind the desk the same proprietor he had known many years before? It turned out that this man was the son of the owner of the hotel--who had passed away--and looked exactly like him. When this man found out that Chomsky had indeed stayed in the hotel and remembered his father fondly,

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<sup>76</sup> I was her student for two years, 1952-54, in the Preparatory (high school) department of Gratz College.

he greeted us happily and rushed to give us drinks and food. Ze'ev and Aliza were very moved by the memories of their youth.

“And I also remember: we went on a trip to the ‘Thousand Islands.’ We arrived on Friday, rented a cottage for three or four days, and rushed to prepare because Shabbat was coming. What do we eat on Shabbat? The cottage was on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. I told Chomsky, let’s go fishing for Shabbat. Chomsky had no experience fishing, but I managed to convince him to join me. We rented a boat and within two hours we returned with ten fish. There was rejoicing and laughter in our household. The women did have to clean the fish, but with our help they prepared and cooked them for Friday night and for the next day. We went to the small village and to our surprise found a Jewish bakery. We bought Challah, Babka and wine and made Shabbat as was fit. This Shabbat gave us great pleasure. We ate, we sang, we talked until very late at night.”<sup>77</sup>

This evocation of a festive, intimate Shabbat in rural Canada is a useful touchstone for assessing to what extent the Chomskys were, as is sometimes said, ‘secular.’ Though they were followers of the ‘secular’ cultural nationalism of Ahad Ha’am--a vision of Jewish peoplehood not dependent on belief in the Torah as revelation at Sinai, and not tied to traditional ritual observance--they went regularly for decades to Shabbat services at Mikveh Israel,<sup>78</sup> kept a kosher home, cherished Friday night dinners at their home with family and guests, had a wonderful Seder each year,<sup>79</sup> and through their teaching and training motivated countless students toward Bible study and toward personal involvement in celebrating Jewish holidays and festivals. Their secularism was not a separation from Jewish tradition but an embrace that was not based on traditional faith.

As the years went by the Chomskys’ two sons, six years apart, grew up and passed life-milestones. Noam and then David had their Bar Mitzvahs, graduated from high school, graduated from college, married quite young, and forged ahead professionally, Noam in linguistics and David in cardiology.<sup>80</sup> Noam and his wife Carol (Schatz) settled near Boston while David and his wife Judie (Brown) lived just minutes away in Philadelphia, creating a rhythm for Will and Elsie of Friday night dinners with David and Judie, visits back and forth to Boston, large

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<sup>77</sup> *Sheviley HaHinuch* 37:4 (June 1978): 205-6. Translated by Shalom Holtz. Gannes’ article is one of five tributes to WC in that issue; the others are by Taffy Baker Sassoon (see below), Abraham Marthan, Elazar Goelman and Zvulon Ravid. Abraham Gannes (1911-- ) was head of the Philadelphia Council for Jewish Education and also a member of the Gratz faculty; he was subsequently Director of the Department of Education and Culture of WIZO/American Section.

<sup>78</sup> Here EC had to sit upstairs in the women’s section, for Congregation Mikveh Israel, though many of its congregants were not Orthodox, maintained separate seating in the stately rows with which the venerable building had been constructed. In her later years EC sometimes slipped a book into her Siddur and read peacefully during parts of the service. Interview with Daniel and Louise Cohen, August 17, 1997.

<sup>79</sup> EC prepared the whole Seder herself, once telling a Hadassah student, “The Seder can’t be any good if the hostess isn’t exhausted.” She also had a tradition of inviting friends and students for lunch during Pesach. Telephone interview with Debby Weiss, July 23, 1997.

<sup>80</sup> Noam graduated from Central High School and from the University of Pennsylvania, David from Cheltenham High School and Temple University. Both married women who attended Gratz.

Simonofsky family Thanksgivings at the Krausses in New York, and occasional excursions to Baltimore for weddings and other special events in Will's family.

Though deeply involved with Gratz and family, Elsie found time for the Philadelphia chapter of Hadassah, an involvement which was to be increasingly important in her later years. Concurrent with her Hebrew teaching, supervision of student teachers, consultation, and family responsibilities, she began in the nineteen- forties giving talks and setting up courses for Hadassah women. By 1948 she was offering a 'Leaders' Training Course' entitled "Palestine, Past, Present--What of its Future?" and teaching an advanced Hebrew class.<sup>81</sup> By the mid-fifties she was already, as is evident from these remarks in a 1956 Hadassah News Bulletin, one of the Philadelphia chapter's most esteemed speakers and course organizers:

"Our Institute theme, 'The Second Aliyah..50 years later' will be brought to a climax by the brilliant presentation of 'Cultural Achievements' by Mrs. William Chomsky...Mrs. Chomsky has been one of Hadassah's favorite speakers...For many years she has served as Education Adviser to the Chapter; under her leadership a diversity of courses in Jewish and Zionist education has been made available to our city-wide membership."<sup>82</sup>

While Elsie was balancing multiple commitments to family and friends, Gratz, and Hadassah, her husband's publications and recognition continued to grow. In 1947 Gratz held a community reception honoring him for twenty-five years of service.<sup>83</sup> His doctoral thesis on the medieval Hebrew grammar of David Kimhi was in 1952 published in book form.<sup>84</sup> In 1957 *Sheviley Hahinuch* published a 'jubilee issue' honoring him in his 60th year, with Hebrew essays by Azriel Eisenberg, Gratz colleague Menahem Glenn, and Noam.<sup>85</sup> In the same year William Chomsky's classic and best-known work, *Hebrew, the Eternal Language*, appeared to considerable acclaim. The book is a loving, erudite presentation for the lay reader of the history of the Hebrew language, and a reaffirmation. of his belief in its centrality to Judaism.<sup>86</sup> *Teaching and Learning*, a text especially designed for teachers-in-training, appeared in 1959.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Report on chapter education activities by Mrs. Lewis (Betty) Heicklen, 1948 yearbook, 52-53, archives of the Philadelphia chapter of Hadassah.

<sup>82</sup> Hadassah News Bulletin, February 1956, 5. Archives of the Philadelphia Chapter of Hadassah. EC's Hadassah activity literally spanned two generations; she taught two chapter presidents who were mother and daughter: Betty Heicklen studied with her in the forties, and Janie (Heicklen) Zolot in the sixties. Telephone interview with Janie Zolot, July 21, 1997.

Unfortunately there is no summary or regular archival record of EC's work for Hadassah. This essay relies on items her friends saved, together with information gleaned from Anniversary Books of the Philadelphia chapter and other materials in their archives. Thanks to members of the office staff for facilitating my search.

<sup>83</sup> *JEd*, 21:1 (Winter 1949): 96.

<sup>84</sup> *David Kimhi's Hebrew Grammar (Mikhlol)* (New York: Bloch, 1952).

<sup>85</sup> 17:4 (Summer 1957) :196-208.

<sup>86</sup> Philadelphia, JPS, 1957, reprinted 1975. He writes: .." Judaism may be defined as the ongoing historical experience of the Jewish people, in which are compounded religious, national and cultural elements. This unique historical experience has been articulated in distinctive words and idioms of the Hebrew language, with which it has become inextricably blended. Dissociate this historical experience from the Hebrew

Even Will's path, however, was not entirely smooth. In the pages of *Jewish Education*, the gentle scholar was intermittently subjected to some fairly pathetic academic squabbling. Issues contested in the broader American context--whole-word versus phonics, carefully chosen word-lists versus immersion--spilled over into the teaching of Hebrew. There are caustic exchanges over word-lists, Hebrew teaching methods and even over the 'Credo' of his basic educational beliefs.<sup>88</sup>

The life of the Chomskys was sweetened as the fifties drew to a close by the arrival of grandchildren--five of them within a ten-year period. Noam and Carol's daughter Aviva was the first, arriving in 1957, followed by Diane in 1960; David and Judie's sons Daniel in 1961 and Don in 1964; and Noam and Carol's son Harry in 1967. Elsie leaped into her role as devoted and doting grandmother, adding large stints of baby-sitting and child-entertaining to her already crowded life. She often took care of Daniel while Judie was finishing school at Temple University, and went off to Princeton one day a week to stay with Avi while Noam and Carol were living there in 1958-59. She joked with her friend Abraham Gannes that "I have a reputation in Massachusetts--I'm the cookie lady."<sup>89</sup> When she and Will traveled there to visit Noam and Carol and their children, she would arrive laden with homemade brownies and cookies sending forth an irresistible aroma through their tinfoil wrapping.<sup>90</sup>

In the 1960s Will and Elsie began to feel the impact of Noam's growing international fame. They had followed his career devotedly, perusing his publications in linguistics as they appeared, and displaying them proudly on the coffee table. But as the decade progressed, his views on the Middle East became quite objectionable to people in the strongly Zionist, Hebrew-nationalist circles in which they moved.<sup>91</sup>

As Noam increasingly expressed views very critical of Israel, people who knew Elsie and Will had to determine what to do in their interactions with them. From the remarks of several informants, it is clear that many people consciously didn't bring up Noam's politics to Elsie--'We never spoke about him', one asserted--though occasionally this practice was breached.

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language, and the result is a pale, anemic reflection, a dilution and sometimes even an adulteration of the original experience." p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> New York, Jewish Education Committee (first published by Gratz in 1953).

<sup>88</sup> See for example the interchanges with David Weinstein in *JEd* 28:2 (Winter 1957-58): 13-24 and with David Rappaport in *JEd* 29:2 (Winter 1959): 86, and the article by Edward Nudelman, 30:1, (Fall 1959): 62-66.

<sup>89</sup> Telephone interview with Abraham Gannes, August 3, 1997.

<sup>90</sup> Telephone interview with Avi Chomsky, September 8, 1997.

<sup>91</sup> This essay does not attempt to present or evaluate Noam Chomsky's complex views about Israel and the Palestinians, but simply to report what a number of people recall about how their own reactions to his views affected their interactions with WC and EC.

But people did wonder, and wonder among themselves, what the senior Chomskys felt. A former Gratz student recalls hearing from friends about a talk Noam gave in Philadelphia during which he criticized Israel severely. Will and Elsie were sitting right in the front row. A number of people from the Gratz community had come out of curiosity. They craned their necks to try to see Will and Elsie's expressions---which they couldn't--asked others who were closer to try to see their faces, and wondered what this experience could be like for Noam's parents.<sup>92</sup>

When someone did undertake to criticize Noam directly to Elsie, several informants concur that she always defended him, either by emphasizing his extraordinary achievements---one informant recalls her saying, "He was invited to Oxford," and,

"They've compared him to Spinoza,"--or by insisting that people misunderstood his views--he didn't really hate Israel.<sup>93</sup> One friend, Clara Isaacman, recalls a dinner party that she and her husband gave for about six couples, including the Chomskys and their mutual friends the Landys. In mid-evening someone began hotly criticizing Noam. "Elsie protected him. Whatever people had to say, she had an answer...The dinner was beautiful and I didn't mind."<sup>94</sup> What is interesting about this account is that despite the confrontation, the dinner party went on, no one left in a huff, and apparently no friendships were damaged.

As Will and Elsie had each rebelled against the Orthodox faith of their parents, yet retained some elements of that culture in their own worldviews, so their own sons, Noam and David, rejected the ardent Hebrew nationalism and Zionism of their parents to march to different drummers, yet kept, re-interpreted, a basic concern for social justice. What could be more usual--at least since the Enlightenment--than Jewish children departing from the path of their parents, though often with an 'underground' connection? The plethora of variations on this theme is almost boring: children of Talmudists becoming socialists or communists, children of assimilated suburbanites reclaiming the study of sacred texts for themselves, children of kibbutzniks becoming wealthy free-market capitalists, and so on.

The difference for Will and Elsie was that their older son, Noam, had become an internationally known scholar and public intellectual, often speaking to packed halls. If he had been simply a successful physician like his brother David, no matter how radical his views on the Middle East, they would have caused little concern outside the circle of family and close friends. But because of his visibility,

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<sup>92</sup> Telephone interview with Toby Ticktin Back, August 31, 1997.

<sup>93</sup> Telephone interview with Abraham Marthan, September 25, 1997. William Chomsky also, on at least one occasion, defended his son in a letter to the Hebrew weekly HaDoar, in whose pages Noam had been attacked. Telephone interview with Zvulon Ravid, July 17, 1998, and interview with Noam Chomsky.

<sup>94</sup> Telephone interview, June 20, 1997. A Holocaust survivor, Clara (Heller) Isaacman (192?- ) is the author of *Clara's Story*, as told to Joan Adess Grossman (Philadelphia: JPS, 1984). She was married to Daniel Isaacman (1925-82) who came to Gratz in 1951 as an administrator. He didn't know "if the faculty would accept him...Elsie and Will took him under their wing." He became registrar and eventually president of Gratz.

Noam's views about Israel and Palestinians and about Zionism took on--for his detractors--a special ominousness: he was in their opinion actually harming Israel.

How was Elsie to cope? One of her former students in Hadassah courses recalls that Elsie, as a good chapter member, often came to hear featured speakers. Several times the speaker's talk about Israel included a denunciation of Noam, and this woman remembers feeling deep concern and compassion for Elsie--the speaker having no idea Noam's mother was in the audience--who had to listen to this tirade.<sup>95</sup>

Such reactions assume that the situation must have been extraordinarily difficult for the senior Chomskys. But in fact we do not know what Elsie--or Will--experienced. What one can safely say is that in their later years the Chomskys were in a situation in which a particular subject was consciously avoided by many members of their community out of genuine concern for them, and possibly also out of ignorance as to their actual emotional needs, reactions, and wishes. Perhaps the silence was partly people's own difficulty in knowing what to say, how to talk with them about Noam, hence silence was not only protection for the Chomskys, but also for themselves. It is also clear that Elsie Chomsky was not about to let Middle East politics get in the way of her devotion to her family, especially her precious time with her grandchildren. Somehow she kept her whole range of important relationships intact. We do not know what the cost was.

Was Elsie Chomsky, as some people have suggested, further to the left than most of her Hebrew-nationalist, Zionist community and hence not entirely unsympathetic to Noam's views? Was she significantly to the left of Will? These questions cannot be answered with any assurance. Gabrielle Auspitz remembers Hadassah discussion groups in the 1940s at which Elsie favored a bi-national state.<sup>96</sup> Daniel Elazar recalls that in the late 1960s she was outspokenly critical of Israeli policies in discussions at which he was present.<sup>97</sup> However, Elsie was temperamentally far more critical and in a way more intellectually adventurous than Will, a difference not necessarily indicative of different politics. As for Will, his accepting and benign nature could encompass a twinkle of left-leaning humor; he several times joked with family members that as an immigrant youth doing menial labor in Baltimore, he had for a time joined the I.W.W.<sup>98</sup> The Chomskys' cultural Zionism is open to a range of interpretation, and one should be especially wary of *post facto* explanations.

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<sup>95</sup> Telephone interview with Janie Zolot, July 21, 1997.

<sup>96</sup> Telephone interview with Gabrielle Auspitz Labson, October 16, 1997.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with prominent political scientist Daniel Elazar, March 27, 1997. The Chomskys came to several talks he was invited to give about Israel when he was living in Philadelphia.

<sup>98</sup> Industrial Workers of the World (the "Wobblies"): a radical union founded in 1905 in opposition to the AFL and to capitalism. During WC's first years in the US, the federal government was pursuing and prosecuting IWW leaders for their opposition to US participation in World War I and for the union's attempts to disrupt metals production in the Pacific Northwest.

The period from the early 1960s till her death in 1972, difficult though it may have been in some respects, brought a late flowering for Elsie, an expansion of a sort, especially in her work with Hadassah. Here a whole new generation came to know her through the 'Young Dialogue' series of courses that she offered to rave reviews.<sup>99</sup> These were courses on the Bible, on Zionism, and on historical-personal search, raising questions such as "What were we--what are we?" Some students fortunately valued and saved their class notes for decades.<sup>100</sup>

These notes reveal beautifully prepared presentations balancing richness of detail with overarching generalization and insight in a manner worthy of any university course of study. There is never any 'talking down'. Elsie Chomsky's lectures on the Bible integrate analyses of different modes of Biblical criticism, contrasts of Biblical stories with parallels in other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, and especially, over and over, a return to the prophets--carefully differentiated in personality and message--in their clarion call for ethical behavior. She emphasizes the covenantal relationship and encourages pride in the Jewish contribution to an ethical basis for society. She speaks of rabbinic literature. Her approach is 'secular' only in a narrow sense, as it is infused with awareness of spiritual forces.

Her course "What were we--what are we?" included Maimonides, Moses Hess, A.D. Gordon, Buber, Nachman Syrkin, and even contemporary sociologists speculating on the reasons for the youth revolt around the world and in the Jewish community. In a 1969 course entitled "Mutual Responsibility--ours to Israel, Israel to us" she takes a very firm position that American Jews must support Israel not only financially but by visiting, sending students, and becoming concerned. Whatever her criticisms of Israeli government policy might be, she was determinedly attached. Her students, mostly women in their thirties, realized that here was someone special. "I was spellbound...She was like a prophetess herself." "I was absolutely enamored of her--so forthright, so brilliant." Yet these feelings of being overwhelmed by the brilliance and emotiveness of her teaching did not make Elsie Chomsky seem distant; on the contrary, the women were delighted to be invited to her home for group lunches. Some became her friends. And that friendship sometimes came with the unusual combination of a spiritual and personal advisor: Some Hadassah women who were her students went to her individually with marital problems, ethical dilemmas, and questions about God. Apparently she welcomed this role of almost-pastoral counseling.

As a woman in a household of three men, Elsie may have wished for a daughter. She had after all been raised with five sisters. Her niece Esther recalls that when inviting her to spend summer at the shore with the family, Elsie would say, "We don't have a daughter, we need a daughter."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, when Sora (Eisenberg)

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<sup>99</sup> These courses began because chapter president Tybie Yermish realized that the younger Hadassah women were of a generation "who knew not Elsie"; she and a few other women originally set up the series. EC invited other able lecturers to teach 'Young Dialogue' courses, but none had the same impact.

<sup>100</sup> Thanks to Janie Zolot, Lea Bramnick, and Sandy Kohn for making their notes available to me.

<sup>101</sup> Telephone interview, July 29, 1997.

Landes, daughter of the Chomskys' dear friends Azriel and Rose, stayed at their home for her last semester of high school after her parents moved to New York, Sora remembers often being referred to half-humorously by Elsie as 'the daughter of the house'.<sup>102</sup> With the Hadassah women in the 'Young Dialogue' classes, Elsie seems in her last years to have found a special group of 'daughters' and to have lavished upon them all the moral and spiritual forces of her maturity as well as the joys of her friendship.

Along with these personal appreciations, in her later years Elsie Chomsky did receive significant recognition from Hadassah for her decades of effort. At the Annual Leaders' Conference on June 6, 1967, she was given an honorary Life Membership and inscribed in the Book of Builders. A photograph showing her receiving these honors is captioned "Hadassah Woman of the Year." On that special occasion she spoke at the plenary session of the conference on "I am a Jew--What am I?"<sup>103</sup>

Additional recognition came in 1968 when Mordecai Kaplan's son-in-law Ira Eisenstein, president of the new Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in suburban Philadelphia, invited both William and Elsie Chomsky to teach there in the college's opening year.

Each taught part-time; Will taught Hebrew and Elsie pedagogy.<sup>104</sup> One wonders whether Elsie was amused to think that the sixteen-year old Brownsville girl who had listened to Kaplan was now teaching aspiring rabbis in the institution that embodied his thought.

In balance with these positive developments, Elsie Chomsky was increasingly disturbed by the war in Vietnam. Her worries about Noam were serious; during one period he faced the possibility of years in jail, and would probably have been tried and sentenced had not the government bungled the case.<sup>105</sup> She worried that David would surely be drafted,<sup>106</sup> and wrote to her sister-in-law Sylvia Simon, "There seems to be no chance for David to avoid this...My heart aches for the boys I don't know who are fighting in this insane, sickening war. I look at the people around me who are totally unconcerned, and I cannot understand

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<sup>102</sup> Telephone interview, September 11, 1997.

<sup>103</sup> Hadassah News Bulletin, May 1967, and clippings and program from the scrapbook of Ruth Fliegelman. EC's contribution to Hadassah in her last decade was quite substantial. Besides the 'Young Dialogue' classes, she continued to organize the yearly Hadassah Seminar Series, a group of five or six morning lectures at the YMHA planned around a theme. She--the only woman speaker--usually gave one of the talks; the other speakers were usually rabbis, academics, or important Israelis. In 1964-65 she led off the series on "Zionism Reinterpreted" with a talk on "Zionism in Jewish Tradition." In 1965-66, under the rubric "Zionism and the American Diaspora" she again led off with "Peoplehood and the American Diaspora". Anniversary books, archives of Philadelphia Hadassah. After her death the series was renamed the Elsie Chomsky Seminar Series, a title it retained for a number of years.

<sup>104</sup> Telephone interview with Ira Eisenstein, August 25, 1997. Eisenstein remarked that teaching at RRC was a bold move for the Chomskys, as many thought it a 'radical' place. Article by Rose Landy in Hadassah News Bulletin, February 2, 1969, in Rose Landy Papers Box 1, FF1, Philadelphia Jewish Archives.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Noam Chomsky, October 24, 1997. Noam signed the 'Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority' He visited North Vietnam, which was illegal. In 1967 he was named as a co-conspirator in the trial of the 'Boston Five' and was arrested in a demonstration at the Pentagon.

<sup>106</sup> He was not.

them.”<sup>107</sup> But quite apart from her personal concerns for Noam and David, Elsie was bitterly opposed to the war. A Hadassah student recalls that one day she came to their evening class quite upset; the My Lai massacre had just ‘broken’ in the press, and she had asked her afternoon class at Gratz to express their reaction. To her great shock--she told the Hadassah women--they didn’t seem at all concerned.<sup>108</sup>

In these later years Elsie retained her ability to make deep new friendships. She and Ruth Fliegelman first met in the early sixties when Ruth was education chairman for Hadassah, and Elsie the education consultant. Though at first Ruth was “in awe” of Elsie’s brilliance and knowledge, the two women gradually became very close, and the two couples socialized together, often at dinner parties where Rose Landy’s husband Sam, a lawyer who loved a good political argument, and Elsie engaged to everyone’s delight in spirited verbal sparring. The Chomskys and Fliegelmans took an especially memorable two-week trip to Israel together in the summer of 1970, visiting many of Will and Elsie’s friends and former students who had made Aliya.

In the years just before Elsie’s death, a special bond came to exist between these two mothers of radical sons: Ruth’s son Ron, having become progressively more radical while at Goddard College, was a member of the Weatherman and went underground in 1970; Noam, though internationally famous, had become anathema to many people in Elsie’s community. In a sense they were both mothers of cherished outlaws and could speak to one another in a very personal way about this.<sup>109</sup>

Another new friend of the early sixties was Taffy Baker, initially a student of both the Chomskys at Gratz; she was very close to the couple for about ten years. Taffy first went to Israel in 1964, made Aliya in 1967, trained to become a professional tourist guide, and welcomed Will and Elsie on their regular summer visits. It was she who introduced Elsie to the formidable Rivka Guber, mother of two exceptionally brave sons who had both fallen in the 1948 war, Ephraim at twenty and Zvi at seventeen.<sup>110</sup>

A posthumous edition of the brothers’ letters had already been issued in Hebrew in 1952, and Elsie undertook at Rivka’s urging to translate the major portion of it, together with some unpublished letters, into English. Taffy, having returned to the US to complete her B.A. at Penn, spent a great deal of time in her senior year (1965-66) assisting Elsie with the translation. She checked the text for accuracy

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<sup>107</sup> Letter dated February 8, 1966, re-typed by Sylvia Simon on April 23, 1997. Her brother Joe changed his name from Simonofsky to Simon.

<sup>108</sup> Telephone interview with Audrey Schiffer, September 17, 1997.

<sup>109</sup> Telephone interview with Ruth Fliegelman, May 6, 1997, and in-person interview, August 15, 1997.

<sup>110</sup> A moshav in Israel, ‘Kfar Achim’ [Village of the Brothers], established by Holocaust survivors from Transylvania, is named for them.

and style and typed the entire manuscript.<sup>111</sup> Then Joan Grossman, a close friend of David and Judie Chomsky and also of their parents, who did not know Hebrew but was a professional editor and had already worked for Will, undertook at Elsie's request to prepare the manuscript for actual publication.<sup>112</sup> So Elsie had the help of two 'daughters.' The book was published in 1966 with the English title, *Two Brothers*.<sup>113</sup>

If one looks at *Two Brothers* together with Elsie Chomsky's two earlier children's books, one sees a return to the figure of the Zionist youth hero who falls in the struggle for the Jewish homeland. This recurring focus could be readily interpreted in terms of Zionist ideology and ethos, but perhaps an intense literary engagement with intrepid armed struggle was one way of coping with her own sometimes overwhelming physical fears. Though Will was an ardent and strong swimmer, Elsie never went in the water. David Chomsky remembers that when in boyhood he swam in the ocean at Wildwood, his mother was never content to know that the lifeguard was watching her child, but stood vigilant, pressed up almost against the water, always extremely nervous. (At times he tormented her by purposely disappearing under the water.) And David's older son Daniel remembers almost exactly the same scene taking place a generation later: he and his little brother swimming at in the ocean at Margate, both sturdy, able young swimmers, the lifeguard watching, but his grandmother always on the shore, constantly beckoning and gesturing to be sure they were swimming in just the right spot, worrying, waiting--a remarkable persistence of pattern.<sup>114</sup>

Elsie Chomsky not only feared the water and the drowning of those she loved, but also car crashes and other imagined catastrophes which could happen at any moment. She herself seldom drove. Once, when she was giving eminent scholar and teacher Samuel Kurland a ride home from Gratz, an approaching car blinded her with its headlights. She let go of the wheel, closed her eyes, threw up her hands and screamed. Kurland grabbed the wheel, maneuvered the car to safety, and arrived home shaken but intact.<sup>115</sup>

For Elsie, even great good fortune could be perilous. When Noam won a prestigious three-year fellowship to Harvard which offered him no responsibilities and complete liberty to think and write, she worried that he wasn't settling into a definite career.<sup>116</sup> Why was she so fearful, so extremely nervous? Might she in some visceral way have remembered the pogrom in Bobruisk? Was it her

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<sup>111</sup> E-mails from Taffy (Baker) Sassoon, September 22 and October 22, 1997. EC spoke and wrote a beautifully correct Hebrew; the two teenage brothers used slang and colloquialisms freely in their letters. To render these in appropriately informal English was not easy for EC, but she persisted with the task.

<sup>112</sup> Telephone interview with Joan Grossman, July 24, 1997.

<sup>113</sup> Tel Aviv: Massada, 1966.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with David and Judie Chomsky, June 19, 1997; Telephone interview with Daniel Chomsky, September 4, 1997.

<sup>115</sup> Telephone interview with Rachel Kurland, November 1, 1997. One wonders how Elsie coped with Will's driving, which according to several accounts was very fast and erratic.

<sup>116</sup> Telephone interview with Robert Teeters, noted above, who heard EC's conversation with his parents on this matter.

father's disapproval, the rigors of the Great Depression, or simply inherited temperament that rendered her so apprehensive? She could become rigid at the approach of a cat. Yet that high-strung vitality and positive nervous energy also animated her teaching. Many Hadassah women experienced "something spiritual about her. " Her achievement as a gifted and determined educator and mentor is all the more impressive when one realizes that she often suffered from severe anxieties.

To the very end, although often frustrated and disappointed with the situation in Jewish education and with some of its leaders, Elsie Chomsky was dedicated to her work. Ruth Fliegelman recalls that Elsie was worried about having to retire from teaching at Gratz: what would she do? Ruth reassured her that there would be many opportunities to lecture. Her friend Gabrielle Auspitz also remembers how Elsie was upset at being forced to retire from the institution to which she had dedicated her best energies.<sup>117</sup> It is extraordinary that though she had been teaching almost continuously since her adolescence, her commitment to Jewish education still burned strongly.

She died in an instant of a heart attack at her home on the afternoon of January 22, 1972, having been that Shabbat morning to a Bar Mitzvah of a former student. Will found her on the floor upstairs and telephoned David at work, but she was gone. In New York, the Simonofsky clan were about to gather to celebrate Florence and her husband's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary when the telephone call came; the party was cancelled and they all drove to Philadelphia the next day. After a simple funeral, Elsie Chomsky was buried in Haym Solomon Memorial Park, outside Philadelphia. At the Shloshim, which was held at Gratz College, the speakers included Daniel Cohen, a lifelong friend of the Chomsky family and a member of the Gratz board of trustees, Ruth Fliegelman, and the Chomskys' old friend Abraham Gannes.<sup>118</sup>

A moving assessment of the Chomskys' partnership appears in Taffy (Baker) Sassoon's memorial article in *Sheviley Hahinuch* about William Chomsky:

"...How ironic that it wasn't Ze'ev who was the pedagogue in the family, but rather Aliza. Her classes were characterized by great liveliness, even minor tempests. Ze'ev's classes were quiet and conservative...One could argue that the niceties of Hebrew vocalization are simply not exciting topics, but the main difference between husband and wife stemmed from their differing styles and temperaments. In their personalities Ze'ev and Aliza complemented each other, and in their joint life's work they succeeded in raising generations of teachers and 'just ordinary' educated, dedicated Jews...

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<sup>117</sup> Telephone interviews with Ruth Fliegelman and with Gabrielle Auspitz Labson, cited above. In the 1970-71 Gratz College Register, four faculty members are for the first time listed as 'Emeritus' ; WC,EC, Samuel Pitlik and Samuel Kurland. In the poignant obituary which WC wrote for his close friend Samuel Pitlik for the Fall 1976 issue of *JEd*, only a year before his own death, he comments "after he was forced to retire, life became meaningless." (45:1, 42) . Perhaps here we hear some of the bitterness Elsie felt as well.

<sup>118</sup> Newsletter "What's New at Gratz College", March 1972; Telephone interview with Abraham Gannes.

“...They were one in their enthusiasm and intellectualism, in their modest lifestyle, in their loyalty and warmth to family, friends, and students--and above all in their devotion to Jewish education in America...They were pioneers and guides in this realm...

“ From Ze'ev, and also from Aliza, I learned that age and status do not have to present an obstacle to affection. With them I found an open house, a light meal and a listening ear.”<sup>119</sup>

Abraham Gannes' warm and nostalgic portrait of the Chomskys in the same memorial issue places them among their colleagues:

“In those days Philadelphia was privileged to have...leading Jewish educators, among them Dr. Leo Honor, Mordecai Halevi, Dr. Pinchas Wechter, Dr. Samuel Pitlik, Dr. Leo Liebreich, all of them now of blessed memory. I was the youngest among them. We were a kind of Havurah. All of us and our wives met often in each others' homes. Ze'ev and Aliza often were the hosts. Aliza, an outstanding Jewish educator...was a charming hostess...Their home turned out to be Beth Vaad L'chachamim [a house for the wise]. These gatherings, the songs we sang, the humorous stories we heard and told... and the heated discussions, gave us much satisfaction and pleasure.”<sup>120</sup>

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William Chomsky was devastated by Elsie's death. He had never imagined that she would die before him. Besides experiencing deep grief, he was at a loss as to how to manage his daily existence. For years he had not written a check or decided what to wear each day. Caring friends cooked complete dinners and placed them in his freezer so that he simply needed to heat them up; he had to be taught how to turn on the oven and then put a lighted match to the pilot.

One day quite by chance he met Ruth Schendel, mother of Noam's childhood friend Bob Teeters. She was a widow. On June 3, 1973, the two were married, Ruth having converted to Judaism. She provided care and warm companionship for him until his death on July 19, 1977. It is striking that none of five obituaries for William Chomsky--in *The New York Times*, *The Evening Bulletin*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Jewish Exponent*, and *Jewish Education*-- even mentions Elsie Chomsky, his wife and his life-partner for forty-five years.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Sheviley Hahinuch*, 37:4 (June 1978): 208-210. Thanks to Taffy (Baker) Sassoon for translating her article.

<sup>120</sup> Gannes, 204-5. Translated by Abraham Gannes.

<sup>121</sup> *NYT* July 22; *Bulletin* July 21, A26, *Inquirer* July 21, *Exponent* July 29, *JEd* 45:3 (Summer-Fall 1977) , 5, by Elazar Goelman

After Elsie Chomsky's death, plans were initiated to create an Elsie Chomsky Educational Resource Center at Gratz College.<sup>122</sup> After Will died, the materials which had been collected became the core of the Chomsky Educational Resource Center (CERC). That resource continues to function though it no longer is named for the Chomskys.<sup>123</sup> But on October 12, 1994, the beautiful Elsie and William Chomsky Reading Room in Gratz College's Tuttleman library on its suburban Melrose Park campus was dedicated. Press releases stated that funds had been provided by an anonymous donor. In fact it was Elsie's close friend from her earliest days in Philadelphia, Rose Landy, who in the best Maimonidean fashion chose to make her gift anonymously so that the Chomskys would have a fitting memorial.

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<sup>122</sup> "Elsie Chomsky Memorial Center will Benefit Jewish Education," *Philadelphia Jewish Times*, December 28, 1972, 1.

<sup>123</sup> It is now the Seidman Educational Resource Center, housed in the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education, located next to Gratz College. The change came in the late 1980s when the Division of Community Services separated from Gratz College. The resource center was re-named for a major donor. Telephone interview with Diane King, February 25, 1998

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