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THE INDEPENDENT STUDY COLLECTION

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A Study of Olga Smyth
Director, High Valley School
1934 Graduate of Bank Street

by Deborah Stone

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree
of Master of Science in Education

Bank Street College of Education
July 1984

I should like to acknowledge with gratitude the information, help and encouragement I have received from many people, including F. Herbert Barnes, Lucy Burrows, Susannah Stone Eldridge, Richard Gelardin, Elizabeth Gilkeson, Sharon Goldstein, Kath Howell, Sarah Hudson, Gordon Klopff, Miriam Stone Leavitt, Robert Leavitt, Erik Nelson, Ted Nelson, Fredda Pravitz, Judith Presser, Henry Quintero, Dee Rittenhouse, Elizabeth Cunningham Smyth, Douglas Smyth, Allan Walstrom, and Dawit Zeleke.

Most thanks are due to Olga Smyth, who has let me use her memories this way.

ABSTRACT

A Study of Olga Smyth
Director of High Valley School
1934 Graduate of Bank Street

by Deborah Stone

A study is made of the educator Olga Smyth, 1934 graduate of Bank Street, examining her particular style of working with children, and what it is based on in her history, education and personality. The continuity of her work and the consistency of her approach is shown, from her days at Bank Street through the making of Incitement to Reading (film by L.J. Stone showing her teaching first graders at the Poughkeepsie Day School in the 1950's) to her work at her own school with children whose emotional and learning problems make it impossible for them to succeed in a regular school setting. The part she has played in the personal and professional development of generations of students is noted.

Olga: You know, one of the things I'd like you to think about this morning-- You see we've made the room very clean and have a lot of space and one reason for this is that I want you to start thinking about...

Girl: Traffic.

Olga: ...where-- about what?

Girl: Traffic.

Olga: Well, now, that's a very good idea, about traffic. It wasn't the idea I had, but that's a very good idea.

Girl: About cities?

Olga: Traffic and cities.

from first grade class discussion in the Vassar College film Incitement to Reading.

INTRODUCTION

WHY AM I DOING THIS? It is a labor of love, certainly, to describe this woman I have worked with for so long, and whose way of thinking and working has so profoundly influenced mine. But this is something more, based on my conviction that what she does and has done should be known beyond the small world of her own school because it has value beyond this world. I am not thinking of proposing that we somehow create more Olga Smyths. That would be impossible and perhaps not really such a good idea. What I want to try to do is give a picture of what one person has done, what she is like, and what has happened in her life, because I think that her story is an important part of the history of education. I am glad to be doing this in the context of my own studies at Bank Street, because my subject

studied at Bank Street herself fifty years ago. Thus my story is a part of Bank Street's own history as well as of Olga's and mine.

WHO ARE WE? In the course of this paper, I will say a great deal about who Olga Smyth is. For now, it is enough to say that she is the Director of High Valley, a small and very special school for children with problems, that she is in her seventies, and that she spent many years teaching at the Poughkeepsie Day School, where Elizabeth Gilkeson was the director before she moved to Bank Street, and that it was Elizabeth Gilkeson's memories of Olga's work with her in the forties that led to my advisor Gordon Klopff's suggesting that I capture on paper just how Olga works.

As for myself, I am Assistant Director and teacher at High Valley, I am in my forties, I have known Olga since before I was four years old, when she was my teacher at the Poughkeepsie Day School, and I am in the process of getting my Master's degree at Bank Street.

HOW DID WE DO THIS? During the fall and winter of 1983-4 I conducted taped interviews (audio only) with Olga about her life and work. I took copious notes as well as taping. The interviews followed a chronological pattern, and reviewed personal history as well as professional development. It is my

conviction that these two themes are completely interwoven in everyone's life story, and perhaps especially closely in Olga Smyth's. After a close review of the tapes and notes of the first seven interviews, I decided which topics needed expansion and clarification from further interviews with Olga. I also arranged to speak with several other friends, relatives, former students and colleagues (mostly overlapping categories) so as to broaden and deepen my understanding of Olga. I will quote directly from the tapes, but I am also attempting to draw the picture myself and to analyze it from my own point of view. This is not really Olga's self portrait, but I will try to make it recognizable to her and to the other people who know and work with her.

WHAT IS MY PART? Let me make my own part in this story as clear as possible. Olga was my teacher at the Poughkeepsie Day School in 1944, when I was four years old, and again when I was ten. She was my teacher for several summers at the Vassar Summer Institute. I went to her summer camp when I was nine and ten as a camper. Then for many years I worked at the camp, starting as a junior counselor and proceeding to head counselor, from the age of thirteen to the summer of my twentieth birthday, when I ran a postseason camp session while the Smyths were away.

I have known Olga almost all my life. I have experienced directly her unique teaching style, while I was young and forming my own inner definition of teacher. I had worked for her and under her direction for many years and from a very early age before I came to teach at her school in early 1968 after the death of her husband, Julian.

Our families were good friends. My parents were in some ways more conventional than the Smyths, and yet they trusted them so much that they named them as the guardians of their three children. For many years they worked together. My mother joined the teaching staff of the Poughkeepsie Day School in 1949, eventually teaching four year olds as Olga had once done. My father taught at Vassar, and formed a close working relationship with the Day School teachers who worked with his Child Study students in their student teaching assignments. Many of the movies he made about children were filmed at the Day School, and showed the Smyths and my mother and other teachers there as models.

In the late fifties and early sixties there were terrible conflicts which racked the staff and tore apart the wonderful school which had been formed in 1934. (Today there are three schools which carry on the old Day School's traditions. The one that bears its name resembles it least, but Olga's school-- High Valley-- and the Randolph School, which was started by a

group of dissident teachers, both have quite a strong philosophical connection to the original.) During the time of conflict the Smyths came under heavy attack. Over the years they had done things which had enraged people. Some were good, like working with lively children and slow learners and giving them a chance to learn in a way they would not otherwise have had. Some were bad, like leaving their boarding students to wait for them after school at the Day School while they did errands. The battles at the Day School supposedly concerned educational issues. Experts were brought in to observe and comment. But personal attacks on the Smyths and other teachers caused such contortions and division that my father began to wonder if the school was coming to the end of its natural life, and if perhaps all experimental institutions had a finite lifetime that could not be extended beyond about twenty-five years without risking this sort of agony and cruelty. My parents were deeply involved in the controversies that marked the end of the old Day School, my mother as a partisan, my father as an arbiter and counselor, and if she had not died in 1962, my mother most likely would have joined the group that formed the Randolph School.

When I came to teach at High Valley in 1968, after some years that featured teaching nursery school, film editing, marriage, motherhood, divorce, study of education at Vassar (my undergraduate work at Radcliffe having been in Scandinavian

languages and literature), and work in the Vassar film program, I felt as if I were coming home. High Valley was the embodiment for me of the great tradition that had informed and given purpose to the life's work of the great teachers who had been my heroes when I was growing up. I brought my son, who was four, and he continued as a High Valley student through ninth grade. I knew that although High Valley had even then begun to specialize in serving children with severe school problems, my son's needs for challenging instruction and intellectual stimulation would best be met in High Valley's humane atmosphere.

What I found at High Valley in 1968 is about what I find there now: a small group of people with lively differences but a strong cooperative commitment providing a special kind of education to about twenty youngsters. At the head of the school, or the heart, I found Olga. Although she had been recently widowed, and she was grieving, as we all were, for Julian, she was the same person I had always known, running her school the way she had run her summer camp and her groups at the Day School and the Summer Institute. I got my assignment at the school the way a former assistant of Olga's had noticed people got their assignments at camp many years before. He had said, "You know, Olga, you see what somebody does best and then you tell them that's their job." I read aloud, in class and at bedtime, I taught writing to nonreaders, I taught reading to

eager learners and to bored and frightened adolescents, I taught math; I taught knitting, I participated in the discussion meetings that continue to form the instructional core of the school. As the years have gone by, I have also become the computer programming and word processing instructor. I do a lot of work with parents, with the people from Albany who oversee us and with the committees from the school districts that send us their children.

Shortly after my father died in 1975 I took my first courses at Bank Street. This was the source of the approach to teaching of the people I had known at the Vassar Summer Institute and the Day School, this was where Olga had studied with Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Barbara Biber in the 1930's. I needed certification in Special Education because High Valley was now a State-approved school providing public-supported education to the handicapped under Public Law 94-142. I was determined to get this certification through taking courses that would not violate the educational principles I had learned from my parents and the others who had taught me. I went, of course, to Bank Street, and I made up my own program of Special Education courses along with a great many Counseling courses, reasoning that in the kind of therapeutic milieu we try to provide for our children, counseling is what we are all doing, even though we may not call it that.

Then, although High Valley had been functioning well with three special education certified teachers-- Olga, Dee Rittenhouse (another former Day School teacher) and myself-- and although Olga had been running High Valley since 1945, our overseer from the State Education Department decreed that Olga, since she was head of an approved school, needed certification in administration. The certification office ruled that her certifications in teaching and special education, her Master's degrees and her thirty-five years as a school head did not count, and she would have to take the eighteen credits in supervision and administration that lead to administrative certification, although they would waive the field work requirement.

Olga took several courses at Bank Street, but it did seem strange to be going for that certification at the age of seventy. She got to see her old friend and colleague, Elizabeth Gilkeson, she took a fascinating course on adult development with Gordon Klopff, and we had a wonderful visit at High Valley from Lucy Burrows and Nona Weekes. Delightful as all the renewed contact with Bank Street was for Olga, we did eventually decide that it made more sense for me, who had been circling around a Master's degree for years, to become the High Valley administrator with certification.

I matriculated at Bank Street in Supervision and Administration, with Gordon Klopff as my advisor. He passed on to me Elizabeth Gilkeson's suggestion that I do an oral history of Olga and the continuities I see in her work over the years.

I have found this project to be tremendously helpful to my development as an educator and as a person. It has provided a focus for my own recollections as a privileged observer of a kind of experimental education which has almost disappeared. It has enhanced and deepened my understanding of Olga Smyth, one of my first teachers, and still my teacher now.

DESCRIPTION

Olga Smyth is a small, vital woman in her early seventies with beautifully sharp, clear features. Her hands are graceful and nicely shaped, unmarked by the arthritis that has stiffened her hips and curtailed her movement in the last five or ten years. The long, straight, dark hair I remember always losing hairpins has turned gray and been cut short-- a little silver cap worn close to her head. Olga used to dance, and still holds herself nearly erect and moves gracefully, as if her body were responding more freely than it really is. Olga's voice and speech are striking. Her intensity, love of language and sense of drama are reflected in the way she uses words. Her elegant pronunciation also seems to echo the British teachers of her West Indian childhood. Her sense of humor can be heard in her laughter and her voice.

Olga is a person whose tremendous personal power is evident in the way people group themselves around her. Her position at the center of her world is as easy to see as the queen bee's in a busy hive.

Although Olga loves to travel, she is most at home in the world she has made for herself, at High Valley, her own school at her home in rural Dutchess County, New York. It is in this

context that we can see her most clearly, since she has shaped it to her own comfort. Olga has told me about a conversation with a psychiatrist whose stepchildren boarded at High Valley about thirty-five years ago. "[She] was very fond of us and thought we did an excellent job and one time asked us how come we got into this work with these kids. And I think our answer was, 'Well, you see, we wanted to live in the country and this seemed like the only way we could afford to live in the kind of place we wanted in the country.'" And she said, "No wonder you do such a good job. I'm so glad you had that kind of a reason because if you had said you'd done it in order to do good for the kids of the world, you would not be doing such a good job." I think that's probably true."

High Valley is a school for about twenty youngsters. Half of them are five-day boarders, the other half are day students. They come to High Valley because with their emotional and learning problems they need some kind of special program not available to them in their home districts. At High Valley they find a school that is like none they ever heard of before. Since most of them have had discouraging failures at the other schools they have been to, High Valley's uniqueness may signal to them from the start that they have a hopeful chance here where it all seems so different. (There is also a new, growing nursery school for Dutchess County children with special needs.)

One of the reasons High Valley does not look like a school is that Olga herself does not think of High Valley as just a school. Some years ago, when someone told her that a friend's five-year-old son was having trouble in kindergarten, she said, "He shouldn't have to go to school! Why doesn't she send him here?"

The atmosphere at High Valley is informal. People dress casually, so they can be comfortable and ready for any messy work that may have to be done. All the teachers are addressed by their first names. The boarding students sleep in Olga's home, a two-hundred-year-old farmhouse with a few modern additions. Classes are in an old barn which has had the stalls and hay press ripped out and carpeting and insulation put in. Everyone spends a lot of time outdoors.

The atmosphere is informal, but that does not mean there is no structure. The structure is not rigid; it is organic and flexible, providing the kind of strength and reassurance the children need.

Olga has ten full-time teachers and assistants working at the school, three of them at the new High Valley nursery school. The four of us who live with her at High Valley really work more than full time, being on deck from early morning until bedtime, but no one works a longer day than Olga herself. The ten of us range in age from twenty-one to sixty-five.

Almost half of us have been at the school for more than ten years; more than half of us were taught by Olga as children or taught with her at the Day School. Half of us have children who were taught by her.

This kind of loyalty is fostered partly by Olga's expectation that people at the school will pursue their own interests. Students who have never thought of themselves as capable learners are transformed when they are encouraged to do what they are good at, and to think about what interests them. In the same way, teachers feel honored to have their independent pursuits respected. They are protected from some of the "burnout" problems that afflict so many people working in special education by the chance to be passionately involved with all that engages them most.

The little world of High Valley forms a closeknit community that is very like an extended family. We are bound together in an unsentimental way, however, with no one feeling pushed to be nice or to love the others. Olga sets the tone for this in the way she interacts with the students.

Olga does not extend herself for a child until the relationship is made. She does not woo children or court them with special treatment or comforting warmth. Rather, she attracts them to her with the magnetism of her great interest

in the world, the intensity of her appreciation of life, her sense of fun, her dramatic flair. She exists as a force which children can react to. They can resist or fight against her without guilt or ally themselves with her and thus acquire a certain strength by association.

Once a relationship is established, Olga's influence is very powerful. She can be extremely generous, but this is only on her own impulse and in her control. Mostly what she gives children is a bracing, noncushioning assumption that they can extend themselves. However, she is entirely nonjudgmental when a child in some way shows that he cannot overcome his accustomed limitations.

When Teddy looks up from the floor where he is lying with his book and asks to read to the whole group at morning meeting, Olga gives him permission matter-of-factly, with no punitive, shaming reference to his infantile refusal just five minutes before to stop kicking the people sitting behind him. While that emergency was going on, Olga reacted wholeheartedly to settle the problem. But now that is over, really over, with no recriminations.

The following chronology lists some of the important events in Olga's life.

Chronology

- 1913 born in Margarita, Venezuela
 early life and schooling in Trinidad
- 1925 move to the States
- 1933 B.A. Economics, Mt. Holyoke
- 1933-1935 Bank Street studies
 with Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Barbara Biber and
 others
 placed at Woodward School & Little Red
 Schoolhouse
- 1935-1941 Teaching at the Hamilton School with Taja and
 Ranger Hamilton
- 1941 1st summer at Vassar Summer Institute with
 Elizabeth Gilkeson, leading to teaching at
 Foughkeepsie Day School (with husband, Julian,
 who had been working on Wall St.)
- 1945 Acquisition of High Valley in the country.
 Boarding children for PDS.
 Summer camp.
- 1960 High Valley shifts from being the boarding adjunct
 of the Day School to self contained school for
 children with problems.
- 1968 Death of Julian.
 Arrival at High Valley of myself and others who
 make the continuing core of staff now.
 Olga's assumption of full leadership.

BEGINNINGS

When I began to interview Olga, she asked whether I would be inquiring just about her professional training, and I replied that because I was interested in what led her to her particular approach to teaching, I wanted to know about more than that. I told her that I thought the way she worked with children was as much an expression of her personality and character as it was a carrying out of some kind of technique or philosophy or approach learned in school. I thought that where she came from and what her growing up was like were just as important.

Olga de Quintero was born on the Venezuelan island of Margarita in 1913. She lived with her mother and her two brothers, one older, one younger, in Trinidad until they moved to the United States in 1925. Olga had always thought that her mother decided to move so that all three of her children could have better educational opportunities, but her younger brother, in whom their mother confided, has told both Olga and me most emphatically that the move was made for Olga's sake, because she was the best student of the family.

Olga was accustomed to being at the head of her classes, whether in Trinidad, where her teachers were Scottish nuns, or in the States, where she went first to a Catholic boarding school in Tarrytown and then to public junior high and high school in Jackson Heights.

SECURITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Olga's mother never became fluent in English, which contributed to Olga's tremendous feeling of independence.

When I asked Olga where her interest in natural science and the outdoors came from, her answer seemed to have as much to do with the theme of independence as it did with the origins of her interest in nature.

O: My mother liked to garden and we always had really a quite beautiful garden. I remember my grandmother. I'm really quite impressed by my grandmother, [my mother's] mother, who lived at one time in a little house not far from where we were living....The people who lived with her were her daughters and a lot of servants, and they were always fussing at her because she'd gotten away from them again. They'd told her to stay in bed but she'd gotten up to water the plants. And I remember being quite intrigued with this little old lady who was always out showing them that she was going out to water the plants.

Olga's feeling of independence seems to be based partly on a kind of optimism, a secure sense that she would be taken care of. Some of her experience in early childhood might ordinarily be expected to result in great insecurity. Her parents were separated when she was an infant, and she saw her father only twice, when she was five and when she was eighteen. Yet she described it to me this way:

We always knew that he was there supporting us because obviously my mother wasn't making any money and we lived reasonably well and the money always came. It came from Venezuela one way or another....[I]t's not a long way and there are boats back and forth all the time. I do remember the people who had come over on the boat would stop in to see my mother and give her little canvas bags with [gold] coins in them....And until I married Julian, my father was always there in the background obviously supporting the family, somehow. So I guess that kind of thing always gave me the feeling of really not having to worry. Not having to worry about money or who's supporting you or anything of that sort....Whenever we needed anything it was always there. His support was always there.

Olga has told me that when she compares herself to other successful professional women of her generation, it seems to her that they have much more complicated feelings about their fathers. She felt neither rejected by her father nor as though the success she had was due to him. She did not have to compete with him for her mother's attention. She and her mother were not in competition for her father's attention, either. Her father was just always off in the background somewhere, doing exciting things.

Olga is very sure of herself in most situations. Her air of certainty is reassuring to children-- and many older people-- and is an important factor in her success in working with even very aggressive or hostile students. When she looks back many years to when she was a child, she describes a sturdy, independent girl. When she was twelve years old, and had just moved to the States from Trinidad, she remembers:

I sort of had a thing I was doing, starting in at Inwood Park and walking all the way through Manhattan in all the parks. I think it was taking me a whole summer....I guess I was exploring all over the place....I did take that trip [on] the trolley car, I must have taken it right there at 125th Street. I just remember going from trolley car to trolley car and ending up I think in Poughkeepsie, or maybe it was near Poughkeepsie. And then going back down. I guess it

took a day....But it was very exciting going from little town to little town-- of course they were all little towns, you know-- and maybe long stretches of countryside in between.

When she was sixteen, a senior in high school, she was apparently pretty much on her own in deciding about where to go to college. "My mother of course was not terribly fluent in English, so I remember doing all the arrangements for college, the interviews." Olga had decided on Mount Holyoke, which was the school of her high school economics teacher. She remembers, "At some point when I was choosing colleges, my uncle, my father's brother, was in New York and was staying with us...and he said, 'Of course you will go to Vassar; that's the greatest women's college in this country,' and I looked at him and I said, 'What! I'm going to Mount Holyoke.' And I remember not saying it, but thinking, 'Who are you to tell me what college I'm going to go to?'"

DENIAL

Denial seems to have played an important part in Olga's story. Just as she ignores what she doesn't want to hear and makes up her own mind what to do (like going to Mount Holyoke even though her uncle told her to go to Vassar) she also ignores negative implications in her experience and denies

their power over her. This trait can be enraging or inspiring to others, depending on their relationship to the outcome of her actions. To Olga herself this way of dealing with life's obstacles seems to have functioned like a magic charm and a source of great power.

An interesting example of this occurred when Olga was talking about her father's support of the family and then went on to remember her wedding present from him.

O: When he heard that I was going to get married he said he would send me a wedding present....Guano [bat dung] was at that time very, very valuable and he was in the guano business. A boat filled with guano was to leave Peru and arrive in New York harbor to be sold by the captain and I was to get the proceeds of it. Now that would have been thousands of dollars. That's the only time that what he sent never turned up. Whoever the guy was he sent with the guano, took off with it, so we never got that wedding present. I never fussed about it much, either. It didn't at that point seem as if I needed any particular money. I had graduated from college and I was going to Bank Street and I knew I-- Julian had a job and I knew I'd be able to get a job myself once I decided I wanted to....

D: That's an interestingly optimistic, cheerful attitude--

Q: Well, particularly when you think that was 1934.

Olga simply ignores the possibility that her father could have made up this loss to her in some way if indeed he was in the lucrative guano business.

Another example of her use of denial to maintain her power in the face of limitation or humiliation is her reaction to her experience of looking for work in 1933, after graduation.

O: Then because I had had all this fancy training in economics and came from a fine women's college I simply thought I was going to step into a good, exciting, high-paying job down in the financial district. My family was from South America and the coffee trade was a very exciting trade and Julian was working in the coffee department at W.R. Grace and Company, so it seemed perfectly natural and normal for me to look for a job in the coffee importing houses. And I had some lovely interviews and I think in the sixth or eighth interview it occurred to me-- it sometimes took me a long time to understand things-- it occurred to me that in the depth of the Depression in a business where there were no women, I didn't have a chance of getting a job in that profession. It seems to me one of the

interviewers who was really being very nice said something about not just that there weren't any jobs but that there certainly weren't going to be any jobs for a woman in this field-- maybe some day. And I sort of looked at him and said, "Well, of course there are going to be jobs for women. There's no question of it." Anyway, time went on and I certainly didn't have any feelings that I was being discriminated against as a woman. I just thought the whole thing was amusing. Imagine! They didn't know about hiring good, intelligent women who were graduates of Mount Holyoke. Anyway, it didn't look as though I was going to get a job.

Very recently, Olga established a nursery school at High Valley for Dutchess County children with special needs. Previously a great many children were going unserved, and the few who were served had to go to school in another county across the river and south of us, quite a distance for little ones to travel. At the time Olga and Dee were exploring the idea, the local authorities told them that there was no need for another program, and that anyway there was going to be a program sponsored by another local agency that did not even have enough children signed up, so the High Valley nursery would not be a good idea. Dee recalls, "I would have given up,

but Olga just ignored them and said, 'Well, yes, we're just going to have a couple of children.'" Eventually the nursery school grew and became established, and now the same people who said not to start the school are begging High Valley to expand the program and accept more children.

DISCOVERY OF BANK STREET

Olga's discovery of Bank Street proceeded from her insouciance in the face of her rejection by the coffee traders, and her acceptance into Bank Street followed an unmatched display of denial-as-magic-wand.

O: I was dating Julian and Julian's sister had a friend, Camille....In fact, she lived right near them in Mount Vernon. Anyway, so I met her at some party either at Sylvia's [Julian's sister] or at somebody's house and I talked with her all evening and all evening she talked with great fun and excitement about what she was doing. What she was doing was going to Bank Street. And she talked about Mrs. Mitchell, and her excitement was so contagious that I said, "Oh, she's the only person I've met since I got out of college that's really having a wonderful time. I'd better go find out what this is all about." So Camille took me down and introduced me to Mrs. Mitchell, and it was already about November and Mrs. Mitchell said, "Certainly not. We're not going to accept anybody in

the middle of the year." It had already started. And so I went to see Mrs. Mitchell again and said, "It's really not the middle of the year, it's just the beginning of the year. The year's simply just started and you're-- At any rate, here I am, eager and anxious to come to your school and learn all about it, and why don't you take me?" And she demurred again and said she'd think about it, and I went to see her again and then I think she said something about, "Well, I really think you want to come here, so we'll take you." So I ended up coming. I don't think it was too late in the year, but anyway, things had already gotten started and I found it just as exciting as Camille had intimated to me that it was going to be.

The magic charm had worked for her again. The third time she asked, she got her wish.

SCHOOL FUN

School was always fun for Olga, from the time she went to convent school in Trinidad through junior high and high school in the States, college, Bank Street, and graduate work at Vassar.

O: The little school I went to in the West Indies was a little Catholic convent school and many of the teachers-- they were all nuns, of course-- and many of them were Scottish and English, well-educated women who really made teaching very exciting....It was fun and the teachers made it fun. And I can remember at least two who were very Scottish, and they were very fair-skinned and were speaking English with a slight Scottish burr, but they were intrigued by being in the West Indies and teaching us. You could tell they were because they enjoyed it. They enjoyed being with the kids and I remember enjoying being in the classrooms and being with them. So it was probably a kind of didactic teaching, but it was fun.

And then at the Catholic school I went to in Tarrytown, I remember the face of the Mother that taught us, and I remember her face as being one that was always smiling and interesting and interested, and there again, that was fun.

Now the year that I was in the Annex (junior high in Queens) was probably the least exciting of any, but I was a good student, so I was having a good time there. Then when I got to high school, there was this woman who taught economics who was a very exciting teacher,

and two others, both English teachers, that seemed to me to be excellent English teachers. Anyway, we did a lot of writing and talking and reading of stories and comparing things in English class, but also I remember its being fun. Except for that one year at the Annex, I think all the education I've ever had was an experience with excellent teachers. Funny, all the teachers I remember are women.

COLLEGE YEARS.

At Mount Holyoke, school kept right on being fun. Olga looks back on her college days as a time of tremendous excitement. She was no longer at the top of her class, but she was interested in everything.

O: I had an awfully good time in college. Both socially and academically it was opening up all sorts of areas....All kinds of things got started for me-- an interest in dramatics and a continuing interest in the classics, and Latin, and Roman history, certainly a wide variety of all kinds of sociological and economic theory....[A]long with all this I was having a very good time otherwise. I had a lot of friends, both...men and women....[I] spent a lot of time being outdoors....So my college career wouldn't particularly impel me towards working with kids-- I can't really see my college background as being part of my professional

development-- but it certainly was full of the excitement of learning of all kinds...I remember spending long hours in the library and enjoying what I was doing. I can't remember ever feeling that college was dull....I took a freshman course in botany and I was so poor as a scientist-- that was one of the courses I really didn't do well in-- but I loved it!...I never have done very well with the things that require specific, precise work...[but] I kept right on with being interested.

In senior year, Olga met Julian Smyth, whose sister Sylvia was also a Mount Holyoke senior. He came up to see her every weekend after they met and came to her graduation in June. The next year, 1934, they were married. That was also the year she went to Bank Street.

NEW YORK DAYS

After her chance introduction to the idea of working in education, Olga plunged right in with her usual energy and curiosity. She describes those years in New York, when she came into her own professionally, as a time of great excitement.

O: Partly because of some of the students I met [at Bank Street], but partly because of some of the other people I was meeting in New York, we were very much interested in the whole liberal, leftwing political scene which was very active at that point...[and everyone] was involved in this kind of leftwing political activity, so Julian and I spent a lot of time when I wasn't working at Bank Street or going to meetings at Bank Street going to political meetings....All one's social and professional life were part of the same picture. These were the people you saw after school and had dinner with or went to the theater with or did things with on the weekend. There wasn't a separation between your professional involvement and your social involvement. And I seem to feel that this has always been so for me. And just to go ahead a little bit, when I started at the Day School, it certainly was absolutely true that that was so exciting and involving that the people we saw on the weekends were mostly the people we worked with during the week. So that went right on.

BANK STREET.

Studying at Bank Street and doing her student teaching started Olga on a new way of thinking and making sense of the world, and she remembers it vividly.

O: Barbara Biber's classes [were] the height of excitement, and a brand new type of learning I had not been exposed to in college. A lot more discussion, certainly. The discussions were also very exciting ones. It was a small group and they were all-- You know Bank Street students: they were all bright and alert and active, and I imagine like the discussions you have with your group at Bank Street right now, very exciting and full of all kinds of concerns for kids.

We have seen that Olga had a wonderful self-confidence that had allowed her to enjoy her college science courses even though she had not done well in them. That same self esteem allowed her to accept criticism in what was to become the area of one of her most outstanding skills as a teacher, leading discussions. We see that she is already intrigued by being a member of a discussion group led by Barbara Biber at Bank Street. Later, she made good use of Lucy Sprague Mitchell's critique of her work as a student teacher.

O: At some point during the year, Mrs. Mitchell, who supervised a lot of the students-- I guess she supervised all of the students-- anyway, at some point she came to watch me lead a discussion group, which I enjoyed doing very much. And I remember at the end of it her comments when she showed me how I could have gone on in different directions or made the discussion

more thoroughly thorough or more alive or more-- like
ONE of her discussions. I remember feeling taken aback
a little bit because I thought I'd done a wonderful
job. And I was very surprised it had not been all that
wonderful in Lucy's mind. But it certainly made me
want to learn to do good discussions with kids.

D: Did you accept her judgment on that, or--

Olga: Oh, definitely. I was just so surprised that she
had these comments to make as to where I had not done
terribly well. What the feeling was was that I had let
things drop too fast, it was-- I can't remember what
the discussion was about-- I could have gone on and on
with some more points and that would have been more
fruitful for the kids.

Olga describes her course of study and the way the program
was set up at Bank Street.

I was a student teacher. It was the next year that I
was a student teacher at the Little Red Schoolhouse,
but this year I was a student teacher at the Woodward
School in Brooklyn, in the first grade with a very fine
teacher who was pregnant. The school was certainly for
upper-middle class Brooklyn kids, with a very
old-fashioned sort of director. For staff meetings we

would meet in her office with a lace tablecloth on the table and silver tea service and coffee service....And I remember being amused, but liking it. It was a nice, friendly school, and it was fun with the kids, and certainly the weekends we had weekend meetings at Bank Street. I guess we met Thursday evening, Friday evening and Saturday mornings-- that's about the same thing they do now, I think-- and the student teaching days were four and a half days a week.

In the whole [Bank Street] class there were about fifteen or sixteen students and the placements were at The Woodward School, The Little Red Schoolhouse, City and Country School, and the Bank Street Nursery School. It was really kind of a small group and people got to know each other very well. It was really a very friendly group.

It was only a one-year program, [but] I stayed for two years....I had just gotten married and Elizabeth Healy Ross, who was my advisor at Bank Street that year, she and I agreed that it might be nice, since I could take the time off, not to go looking for a job at that point but to come back to Bank Street and work that second year. It made sense to me to do that. Also my mother was very sick. She died that fall. And I had to spend

a lot of time with her, taking care of her, and so forth. So that was another reason for not taking a job that fall. That was the reason I took two years at Bank Street....And it was 1934 and I guess there weren't any jobs. And Barbara Biber had said something about if I stayed for the second year...I could work on a special project with her on children's language, and that would be the equivalent of a master's degree work, although they weren't granting master's degrees. But in both our minds it was the equivalent of a master's degree. So that was the second year that I worked. It was sort of doing research on children's language.

LITTLE RED

Olga's next student teaching assignment was at the Little Red Schoolhouse.

O: I was placed at The Little Red Schoolhouse for the whole year in the first grade, and for a good part of the year the teacher was sick. I can't remember whether that was Spring or Fall, but anyway she was sick, so during the time she was out I was in charge of the whole group. It was a group of twenty or twenty-four very active, very bright, New York City kids, children of very exciting people, dancers and artists and college professors and so forth, so that it

was a very exciting group to work with. The school was a wonderful place to work, Mabel Hawkins was certainly a magnificent teacher to be associated with and so that also was a wonderful year....The school was small enough so you knew a lot of people. Elizabeth Irwin was somebody I could go and talk to and meet with. And during the time I was in charge of the first grade, when Mabel was sick, and Elizabeth would keep very close track of what I was doing, it was very helpful and she would come up with some very good suggestions.

Everybody in the school was [supportive] to a student teacher substituting for one of their teachers, because they really had highly experienced teachers because their groups were not easy. They'd been trying to show that you could do progressive education within the limitations of a public school setting. Though their groups were larger than either Bank Street or City and Country, they were not really as large as the public school system because their kids were very hyperactive, creative kids. So that they were not easy groups at all to teach. You really had to be on top of everything. And I remember a lot of us said that when you taught at the Little Red Schoolhouse you really just went home, had dinner and went to bed, you were so tired at the end of the day. But I did hear other

teachers at City and Country and Bank Street say the same thing, so I guess it is-- everybody must get very tired.....

Instead of having a lot of different placements which many of the other students were having, for some reason or other-- maybe it's because I was being very helpful at The Little Red Schoolhouse-- they kept me there for the whole year. So I was Mabel Hawkins' assistant for the whole year, including June camp. In those days The Little Red Schoolhouse used to do this every June. They just had the school out and we went off to Camp Woodland, [which] was run by Norman Studer who at that time used to teach at The Little Red Schoolhouse.

I might as well tell you one of my clear and favorite memories of Elizabeth Irwin. I guess it was while I was in charge of the first grade when Mabel was sick. [A special favorite of mine], Michel was being obstreporous and so he had to go down and spend the morning with Elizabeth in her office. So when it came time for me to go get Michel from Elizabeth's office I walked into the office and there was Elizabeth on all fours crawling underneath the desk where Michel was hiding way in a deep recess of the desk and Elizabeth was trying to get him out. I just remember that I

walked in and got down on my hands and knees and said, "Come on, Michel, it's time to go somewhere else," and he crawled right out and came with me. I think my stock in Elizabeth Irwin's mind went right up. She was red in the face and here she had tried to cajole him, entreat him, entice him out and he wouldn't come out. I mean he was such a devil.

Olga is amused and rather proud to remember another sort of connection she had with Elizabeth Irwin, who was the adoptive mother of Olga's friend, June Westwood.

O: Well, Elizabeth Irwin had adopted apparently a series of generations of kids, and June was one of the early ones, and she was about my age and was a student at Bank Street and she and I had gotten to be good friends. She was named for a friend of Elizabeth's who was named Elizabeth Westwood, and so June was named Elizabeth Westwood, Junior, and the other kids would call her June. And so through her I got to know Elizabeth Irwin in a more friendly, social fashion and used to go to dinner at Elizabeth's, who was then living with Catherine Anthony (the daughter of Susan Anthony), who wrote some historical novels that seemed to be mostly about famous women, like Catherine of Russia, Elizabeth I of England, and people like

that....Anyway, Elizabeth and Catherine had adopted a new set of babies, so they each had a baby....So those two little babies were sort of socializing with each other. I guess they had someone looking after them....Anyway, one evening at dinner Elizabeth and Catherine looked at each other and said, "Well, let's ask her." So Elizabeth said would I consider a job of taking care of the babies, "Because the babies are just about getting to the language development stage and you speak such a nice kind of English that we think it would be good for the babies to have the learning experience with you." Well, I thought it was very nice but at that point I can't remember if I was teaching at The Little Red Schoolhouse or really looking for a more grown up kind of a job. Anyway, I thought it was very nice but I didn't accept it.

THE HAMILTON SCHOOL.

Olga's first job after leaving Bank Street was at the Hamilton School. Her stay there, from 1935 to 1941, was important in forming and crystallizing some of her attitudes and her style of teaching and working with children and colleagues.

Olga: The Hamilton School was started by Taja and Ranger Hamilton....I think I got the interview because they called Bank Street, looking for a teacher, and there I was. They wanted a teacher for the first grade, and there I was, a very experienced first grade

teacher....They had a very tiny nursery school in the Heckscher building on Fifth Avenue. The Heckscher building had been built by August Heckscher as a kind of a big community center, and a lot of floors in the building were being used for groups of one kind or another, youth groups, parent's groups, and so forth, and the Hamiltons had rented one half of a floor, which gave them a very nice apartment and beautiful big classrooms. Mr. Heckscher had spared no money in equipping this building. I remember one of the standout things about it was the windows were made out of a kind of glass that allowed the-- whatever it is-- the rays of the sun to come through that got filtered out by most ordinary glass....Anyway, it was very special glass and it was probably the most comfortable and well-equipped classroom I have ever taught in-- beautiful floors, windows, desks and so forth. The Hamiltons...had had a lot of different kinds of experiences. Mr. Hamilton was already in his fifties (his wife was about thirty) and they just wanted to do a very exceptional nursery school that was privately run, and in order to really have enough money to have an exceptional school, they went after the people with money. So they had a collection of the old families of New York City-- that is, that generation of the old families of New York City, with their kids-- and they

were all people who not only had a lot of money, but really remarkable backgrounds, and a lot of them were involved in all kinds of service things around the city....It was a very exciting school and the parents were all helpful, dedicated people, and when the school needed money they would pitch in and get theater tickets or run a dinner party or something....As I say this I remember that my starting salary was sixty dollars a month, but in 1935, sixty dollars a month, well, most of my friends said I was lucky to have gotten a job, since nobody was hiring anybody. But there were, in those days, lots of these small, experimental schools starting up that didn't have much money, but had a lot of exciting, fun--. There was Manumet, and then there was one in Fort Washington-- I visited all these schools looking for jobs-- and there was one at Croton, all of them having exciting people in the arts on the boards and starting the things....I remember June, my good friend, took a job upstate...in a residential school, and her salary was about the same as mine....[Y]ears later...I found out that Martha [a woman who later worked at High Valley] had been working in some school in Hastings-on-Hudson, a school that had been started by all the leftwing labor people for their kids. There were lots of these very liberal, progressive schools being started.

So, there I was at the Hamilton School, and this is where I had such a good time in first grade, and Carolyn Zachary, whose kid was in my group, ...decided I...was a very good teacher, but I didn't know how to teach reading, so she thought I ought to have the training with the Orton-Gillingham system and I used to spend one afternoon a week working with one of those people. That's when I decided that that really was not my way of teaching reading anyway, or if it was a good system then it needed something else to go with it to make it more-- so it would be more fun. It seemed to me it took the excitement out of learning to read. This is interesting because Carolyn Zachary is the one who was talking to us about love and warmth and said, "My five-year-old son, who loves his truck, gave it to me to sleep with last night."

(Twenty years later Olga would be regarded as such an expert in the teaching of reading that a movie would be made at Vassar just to show her method of teaching children to read.)

D: I remember hearing from you that [The Hamilton School] was a wonderful school and that probably

working there had a lot to do with shaping your attitudes.

O: Well...after Mount Holyoke, which had been very academic and intellectual, and then after Bank Street, which had been also very intellectual and creative and exciting, the emphasis at the Hamilton School was on the emotional side of the children and teachers. It seemed to me-- I was at age twenty-three or so, that this was the first time I had hit that emphasis so strongly, although it seems to me Barbara Biber and Lucy Sprague Mitchell must have had that kind of emphasis too in their teaching. But somehow at the Hamilton School it was more real. It was more something you talked about all the time in staff meetings, it was something you were thinking about all the time. They had worked with A.S. Neill, and a lot of their emphasis, which got across to all of us, was this attitude about feelings. It seemed to me to be just a kind of new dimension to bring to teaching. In addition to that, Taja Hamilton was an extraordinary person in working with both kids and [adults]. He had a great sense of fun, a great sense of enjoyment of working with kids, and to hell with the achievement and the marks and the exams and grades and systems. It was actually very difficult working with him in the first

year, because I would get the kids all set to do something in writing or reading or so forth and he would wander in and say, "I am going off to play in the park, is anybody going to come with me?" And all the kids would just follow him out of the room with me at the end of them and we'd all go play in the park and I used to be a little upset that he had upset my teaching schedule so much, but it didn't take me that long to realize that that was perfectly okay to go ahead and let-- You know, the kids were getting as much out of wandering around the park as they were by having the classroom. Certainly it was a very supportive group of parents and they really loved Taja and Ranger so much that whatever they did was okay.

Olga sometimes plucks children out of their classroom in that way at High Valley, so it apparently struck a kindred spark in her when Taja did that.

O: Anyhow, I stayed at the Hamilton School for a long time. We went up eventually to the third grade, and I did the first and second grade and eventually we moved from the Heckscher Building...to 82nd Street, where we had our own building and there again the Hamiltons had a lovely apartment on the top floor, the fifth floor, which was the attic, and the four stories of the school

part of the building were classrooms, and I had one on the third floor, facing the south and having a balcony....I stayed with them until 1941.

D: One of the things that's different about you is that [High Valley]...is a proprietary school and you don't have a board....I remember asking you about this ages ago...and your saying that you'd been so appalled by several experiences you'd had with boards along the line, that that was one of the reasons you'd set it up this way, and I guess the first one you mentioned to me was the Hamilton School.

O: Yes, well, I stayed with them until '41 and then kept in very close touch....and I don't know how many years later it was that...Ranger called me and said would I be interested in coming down and taking over the Hamilton School from them....So I went down to see her and then what had developed in the years I had not been there: the Hamiltons and the staff had gone more and more in the direction that Neill had started them out in and they'd become very involved with the Reichian school of psychiatry. And of course they'd been started in this direction anyway....But the composition of the board had changed and they had become less friendly to the liberal, progressive,

Reichian, A.S. Neill kind of thinking that the Hamiltons themselves-- and most of the staff went along with them-- believed in. So, eventually they'd come to what had to be a parting of the ways....So it must have been ten or eleven years that they had been running the school...and the Hamiltons had to leave. So the board took over the building and the Hamiltons said they'd like to keep the name Hamilton School, so the subsequent school [took the name of the acting director and] was changed to the Boardman School....And the Hamiltons left New York and started another activity....That was certainly a very devastating experience as far as I was concerned, seeing this really wonderful school that these people had started kind of gradually being taken away from them because the current board was not in agreement with the philosophy of the Hamiltons-- of the founders and the staff who were teaching.

VASSAR SUMMER INSTITUTE. On the recommendations of Rhoda Harris and Carolyn Zachary, Olga went in the summer of 1941 to the Vassar Summer Institute, a program for families that offered group activities for children and classes for their parents. All was tied together for the staff by the lectures and leadership of Mary Langmuir, who was then head of the Child Study Department at Vassar. Elizabeth Gilkeson and Eveline

Omwake, Director of Vassar's nursery school, were the heads of the children's school at the Institute. Olga worked that summer with Rhoda Harris in the oldest group. Her son, Douglas, was in the two-year-olds' group.

Olga describes her summers (that first one led to more) at the Institute as idyllic. There she met people who were to become lifelong friends: Hugh McElheny, the brilliant musician and music teacher; Hanna Kann, the teacher who later married Hugh; Lou Gilbert, the psychoanalyst, who some years later bought a country place right near the Smyths' with his wife, analyst Ruth Moulton; and of course Elizabeth Gilkeson, who made Olga an offer that seemed too good to be true. Would she and Julian (who had been coming up from the City on weekends) like to come teach at the Poughkeepsie Day School in the fall? Olga could teach four-year-olds at the eight-year-old parents' cooperative, and Julian, math and science.

The Smyths' reaction to this invitation was enthusiastic.

O: Everything was lovely. The campus was beautiful, it was comfortable, stimulating, exciting, fun. It really was just such fun that when Ibbey offered me the job at Poughkeepsie Day School, it seemed too good to be true, that we were getting a job in such a nice place.

Julian was glad for the opportunity to leave what seemed like a deadend job in New York. Douglas remembers Julian's taking him to visit the firm in about 1949, and pointing out

that everyone he had been working with was still stuck at about the same position. Julian happily spent the rest of the summer of 1941 in Maine with Olga and Douglas, reviewing his math and science.

Olga laughingly recalled that after they had moved into a little house near the Vassar campus, the head of the board called on them.

O: Apparently she reported back to the others that this new young couple was socially acceptable. And I remember thinking, "Well, we have moved from the top social group to what they say is the top social group in Poughkeepsie."

When I commented that I was interested in the connection that seemed to exist at that time between the far out progressive educators and the upper class, Olga replied:

I used to keep saying years later that if the Poughkeepsie Day School parents had been aware of the political and progressive bias of the teachers and staff, they might not have been sanguine about our running the school. But there again, the kids were doing well...so the parents went along with whatever the school was doing. Now the Board at the Hamilton School did not... (and eventually the Day School did not).

TEACHING AT THE DAY SCHOOL

In describing her days at the Day School, Olga wanted to start with the Director, Elizabeth Gilkeson, the person who had offered the Smyths the jobs which took them from the City.

O: Elizabeth Gilkeson was the director....[She] was always interested in everything, in the people, in the kids, in what you were doing. She was probably the most supportive kind of director any young teacher could have. And I think that all the teachers at the Day School felt this, and I think the kids felt it and I think the parents felt it. And she never directed you in a direct fashion or in an unfriendly fashion. She had a way of-- if she were being critical, she had a way of turning it around so it became humorous and...she wasn't the one who was...trying to change whatever it was the teacher was doing. She would sort of get the teacher to see the need for changing herself, in a very subtle fashion.

Olga must have been very much influenced by that, because it certainly seems to be something she herself does.

O: [She was] very supportive in whatever you tried to do with kids or with parents. I don't think I ever had a single day of feeling that Ibby wasn't backing you up, supporting you right, and I'm sure Julian felt the same way. You got so you were devoted to her. And it seems to me a great deal of humor, too, was part of it. And we all got to know each other pretty well. We all got to know each other's families and each other's problems...so that a kind of interdependency grew up. And with all of this, a great deal of intellectual stimulation. She was certainly abreast of everything that was going on-- you know, the real thinking that was going on-- in all the different, not just the educational fields, but all sorts of different areas....The Day School was also small enough...so, you know, you got to know each other....The parents were in and out all the time because they were always helping, getting the lunches ready or doing the shopping or taking the kids on trips. And there were many, many evening meetings and potluck suppers and everybody shared all sorts of things and it was a very stimulating small group of people who worked together most cooperatively.

This was another idyllic time, in Olga's recollection.

O: It was a time in American society when young people like ourselves were very excited....We weren't downed by the Depression or the War. People were full of hope. You felt that you really could reform education, really could make a dent on society, that changes could be made. You know that whole Roosevelt era was full of hope. The war really may have been the thing that crushed everything; World War II really changed a lot of how people lived and thought. But it seems to me that I would say that all of the people I knew and worked with had enthusiasm and excitement, and enjoyment of what we were doing. It wasn't just a job. Everybody I can think of was feeling that way. You knew Hugh. Music was the most exciting thing in the world to him, and sharing it with people. He could teach all day and then practice the trombone in the evening, and then at the end of that sit around and do music with anyone that wanted to sing and play.

Eventually Hugh and two other men on the staff went into the service. Then the only men left at the school were Julian and Larry Lawrence, the janitor, who was the husband of a Poughkeepsie public school teacher. Olga remembers:

Julian and Larry had to take care of the plumbing and the heating and the roofing. In that old building

something was going wrong every other day and Larry and Julian would fix it....It seems to me that through the entire war years he was really on call all the time.

The parents were in and out of the building, too. Not so much the fathers then, of course, but certainly we had a dedicated group of women. There wasn't anything that you needed that somebody wouldn't help-- and it wasn't with money. At this point there were a few wealthy parents. I think a lot of them were not wealthy parents, but they would certainly give a great deal of their time and work towards helping make the school go....And there was no dichotomy between the parent group and the teaching group.

In 1945 the Smyths bought High Valley, an old farmhouse on 118 acres, about twenty miles from the Day School. There they began to board Day School students who were from out of town or had some other reason they could not live at home with their families. At High Valley the Smyths finally had the country life they had been wanting. They kept cows, horses, goats, sheep, cats, dogs, chickens and once even a raccoon. They built a pond and a tennis court; they planted a big garden.

People at the Day School differed in their opinions of the Smyths' boarding adjunct. Some felt that the enterprise took

time that Olga and Julian should have spent at school meetings. ~~Some~~ felt that the kinds of children the Smyths were serving were too difficult for teachers to handle in the classrooms. Some thought that those difficult children were frightening parents of desirable children away from enrolling them in the school. Some thought that the students from High Valley brought the school something valuable and wonderful; that they were interesting and exciting. (One teacher said to me, "The greater variety of kids is what made PDS better than Little Red or City and Country. I loved the Day School because there was such a broad representation of class.") Even now, almost forty years later, people grow heated and upset when they tell me what they thought then.

Olga has often been at the center of controversy. Not that she herself is interested in controversy-- she stirs it in others. She seems to sit in the calm eye of the storms she creates. People can become very worked up about her.

Aside from the controversy over the rightness of the Smyths' taking on a boarding school, people also disagree about Olga's personal qualities. People differ in their assessment of Olga's ability to conceptualize her work, for instance. Elizabeth Gilkeson, who has described herself as a thinker who is an abstractor rather than an observer, and who saw her role as Director of the Day School to be partly that of teacher and discussion leader for the staff, sees Olga as less a thinker than a doer.

Perhaps this is partly because Olga's great gift for getting others to explain their ideas outshines her talent for putting ideas into words herself, but perhaps it is also because of the role she was playing in relation to Elizabeth Gilkeson. Many years later, when Olga had been running her own school for some time, she was talking with a young woman who was going through an unhappy love affair and was just embarking on a writing career. Olga told her that some women define themselves through their relationships with men, some through their children, and others through their work, but that it was important in her view to forge an identity independent of all these roles. The young woman, who is now married, a mother, and a writer, has never forgotten this bit of wisdom, and is impressed and moved that Olga had distilled that sense of the meaning of her own life and put it into words at a time it was needed, and had said it just at the time it could be accepted. (Olga's inclusion of one's work as also being unable to bear the weight of self identification seemed especially profound.)

Herb Barnes, a consultant and expert in group care who was a Bank Street student and Olga's assistant at the Day School in 1949, also saw Olga as an effective thinker. He says that he regarded Olga as his teacher, and when he could not understand something, he would ask her to explain.

H: I pressed for an answer. I figured I deserved it. I was a student. I didn't know anything. I'm sure that some of her answers were just thought up, spur of

the moment, but that doesn't mean they were superficial. I've always felt that Olga had an incredible sense of educational philosophy behind these seemingly superficial or accidental kinds of events. I would take exception to what Ibbey said. I think [Olga's work] originates from a very clear theoretical understanding, an understanding so clear that it probably doesn't need to be talked about theoretically. She's very clear on what she does and why she's doing it, and in a way that's transmittable, too. But you have to press for it.

Olga has a tendency to compression and allusion in her writing and speaking that is mistaken sometimes for an inability or reluctance to think abstractly or enjoy a strictly theoretical approach. The danger of this tendency lies in the assumption that the listener or reader will be able to fill in the blanks for her. When it works, though, what she says is like a shared creation, as we can see by how Herb Barnes invested one of her oracular utterances with meaning.

H: Olga would have this schedule on the board, absolutely detailed: 9:00 we're doing this, 9:20 we're doing that, 10:10 we're doing this, 11:14 Outdoor Time. This absolutely clear, rigid schedule on the board, and never, ever would this happen. And finally once I asked, "I don't have any great problem with this, but

as a matter of my own learning I'm interested in why is it that...there always is deviation...but the schedule is always there and it never seems to have any relationship?" "Oh," she said, "it has great relationship. As long as the schedule's there, we always know what we're departing from." I remember that vividly to this day, and I've always felt that that's really a very important point about organization. It's a combination of preplanning and flexibility that for me is a kind of a principle that has always stood me in good stead. This is a fundamental piece of wisdom.

Olga is an artist. Perhaps one should not expect the artist to be able to rationalize and explain her art, although some people value that ability in an artist and confuse it with a measure of the artistry. When Olga works so successfully with children in groups or singly, intuition is at work in a powerful way. Like other artists, Olga seems able to tap her unconscious, and respond to the children (and to the adults she connects with) in a way that communicates with their unconscious.

One former student recalls panicking at the beginning of an all school assembly at the Day School years ago, and wanting to be sent to the office where he would feel safer. He acted up in a minor way, staging just enough of a tantrum to save

face all around. Olga responded in what may have seemed a heavy-handed way, and sent him to the office. He remembers this thirty-five years later as an illustration of her sensitivity and understanding. Olga's comment on this when I told her about this former student's recollection was as follows:

[There were] instances like that in which I had a confrontation with a kid and then thought to myself afterwards...that's exactly right, although at the moment it looked as if I was being punitive....Then it turned out that was exactly the right thing to have done for that particular child...that was exactly what the kid needed all the time, or wanted, even....[It's] kind of a non-verbal communication....You know I've always said that good teaching was a lot of intuition...and I think this is not really true just of working with kids but I think of working with one's colleagues.

Elizabeth Gilkeson's impressions of Olga's teaching style are still strong after all these years:

Olga was always very active with the kids and nothing was too much trouble for her about getting things for the kids or when it came to trips or going out on the hill in wintertime and sliding and all of that...so

that she was never a passive teacher without much going on.

One of the things that appealed to me-- and I'm not sure when I first began to notice it-- she had an interesting way of disciplining. I think she always maintained it. I think she still probably has the same way of doing discipline. She never really had to be very cross, but she was always very firm, and her firmness came through to the kids so that they didn't attempt to do things with her that they attempted to do with other people....It had something to do with her being able to be very definite and it had something I think to do with the fact that on the whole they had a good time with her-- there were interesting things to do. I don't remember ever really feeling that she got stuck with situations she couldn't handle.

What I remember about Olga also is a very distinctive way of talking she had. She still has an accent or a very clipped way of using her words....I think that in a way that somehow showed strength to the kids. I think that with her kind of strong, interesting way of speaking, there was a very big definiteness about her.

And then I think that she was certainly one of the

people that was fun at the staff meetings. Whenever we got talking about new things, she was always very enthusiastic and really working at it.

Certainly the easy and complete assumption of authority that made discipline easy for Olga when Elizabeth Gilkeson first knew her has continued to be a distinguishing feature. For generations of students, the cry "Olga said!" has settled disputes. This is not to say that children are cowed by Olga. Her Mary Poppins-like confidence that they will obey her seems in a paradoxical way to free them to explore their own ideas and solutions without anxiety.

Elizabeth Gilkeson did go on to say that she thought Olga was not a nurturing person, and that there was a certain lack of warmth about her, but then answered her own concern with an interesting observation:

I always felt [Olga was], you could almost call it a little cold, and yet in a funny way it seemed to hold kids to the fact that they couldn't be too babyish or too emotionally demanding, because they knew it wasn't going to get anywhere with her. So that in a way she was good about the fact that children in the school grew up with her. She was helping them always grow up. But there were times when I felt that she could be a little softer.

Herb Barnes has memories of debating this issue when discussing High Valley with Elizabeth Gilkeson:

I remember Ibby asking me how I was getting along at the Smyths' [where I was working weekends]. I said, "Oh, fine," and she said, "Well what do you think about the meals?" and I said, "Awful, but that's not important." She said, "Of course it's important with growing children," and I remember explaining to Ibby how it might be important in some situations, but at High Valley it was simply more or less taken for granted that...there were more important things that were being concentrated on....Over the years I've heard Olga criticized for lack of concern. There would be substance to that if it were lack of concern, but I don't think it's that. I think it's a matter of different priorities.

I know that for my friends who lived at High Valley the spartan regime was a point of great pride. People like Elizabeth Gilkeson who worried about the children's beds and meals, might have been surprised to know that the children were making hard boiled eggs and peanut butter sandwiches and taking them out to their tents, and that there was at least one year when they preferred to sleep outside right through the winter. (Of course one boy did write a story when he was in college, in

which he admitted that he slept outside only because the other kids did.)

In the 1960's Herb Barnes was the head of Carson Valley School, which provided group care for dependent and neglected children, and which years before had been one of the original cooperating schools to work with Bank Street.

H: I wanted [Olga] to come down and talk to the staff at Carson. [They were] all caught up in the whole business that what you do with kids is care for them....Institutional staff gets so caught up in the whole business of meals, and the cleanliness of clothing, and the proper making of beds, and Olga literally had no interest in that jazz. All the energy that went into that for some people was replaced on her part by the quality of learning....That was quite an amazing learning experience for them, to realize that there's a higher level of interest that can really tie things together. See, that kind of nurturing is a whole different kind, and it's really what it takes to run what a friend of mine in Israel calls a reclaiming environment.

She showed the movie [Incitement to Reading] and she did the whole session with staff exactly as I'd seen her do sessions with the kids at High Valley. The

context was reading, but the approach to reading was of course very much in this whole philosophy, that you provide kids with intellectual stimulation and emotional support and the reading's going to happen. You don't need to teach reading. You don't need to teach anything. You provide an intellectually nurturing, humming environment.

[The film and the workshop showed her] ability to get totally involved in the activity of the kids she was working with, totally involved in what's going on in a group discussion or a group activity or group problem or whatever and excluding everything else and being completely absorbed by that and yet not being absorbed at the level of the consternation of the kids. It's a matter of respect for the quality of their problem.

Olga's demand that children integrate their own experience is related to this respect. For instance, when she goes through the ritual at the end of a class of hearing each student's plan for the next period, it's not for her own information-- she'll forget immediately-- it's for themselves. She's clearly investing the experience with the energy of her commitment, showing them how she values them and this enterprise of integration.

Olga really listens to people. There are many demands on her attention, and all must be met. Herb Barnes remembers going on a camping trip with the High Valley kids when one boy, after trying again and again to pick the shad flies out of the pancake batter, gave up and said they should just pretend the flies were raisins. When they got back, all twelve who had been on the trip had to tell Olga the story, and the twelfth had the same feeling as all the others, of her deeply appreciating this same story.

That quality of attention is one of the things that keeps so many coming back to see Olga. My sister says:

I love coming back... and checking in with Olga, and whenever I go to a new place or do a new thing, I look forward to telling her about it....There's a real delight she takes...[in] the things you have to say....All the stages of my life that I've been through...adventures, and one's ideas and perceptions....But you know you don't have the feeling she's being a wonderful listener because she loves you...and it's so sweet of you to have an adventure, but because it's really interesting.

The kind of attention Olga gives each person combined with her easy authority leads her to treat each child in a special way. Before children really understand this they see her as being unfair, but they soon become as clear as she is on the

irrelevance of a narrowly applied concept of fairness. Each person is special, and has different needs from the others. Children are encouraged to examine and come to understand and value their own differences, and the cries of "No fair!" diminish.

For most of the years they worked at the Day School, the Smyths had the boarding program at their home for about fifteen Day School students. In the summertime they worked at the Vassar Summer Institute and then ran their own summer camp at High Valley, eventually for about forty children. They may have been stretched pretty thin, but it was stimulating and exciting, and the busy kind of life they wanted. And somehow they always found a few weeks before school started at the end of September to go traveling.

Olga started out at the Day School teaching the four-year-olds. Eventually she taught first, then second and third grades. In 1950, when the fifth grade teacher left in the middle of the year, Olga took over that class, too. But Olga's class always included visitors. These were usually children who did not fit into any particular group very well, or children who were very difficult for other teachers to handle. Even now, later at High Valley, such children wind up in her orbit. At the Day School, Olga usually worked with an assistant, and even when she was alone, she says the first thing she always did was divide the class into smaller working

groups. Mabel Soskin, whose daughter had been at the Day School some years before, worked with Olga for many years, at school and at High Valley. The two women developed a strong friendship and happy working partnership that can be seen clearly in Incitement to Reading.

(Years later, during the Day School's time of troubles, the Smyths and Soskins planned together to leave the States and establish themselves in the Caribbean. Even after the Smyths had decided instead to continue to run High Valley, but independent of the Day School, they took their students annually on a trip to the Caribbean, some years to Puerto Rico and some years to St. Maarten, where they had found property with the Soskins.)

Life at the Day School continued excitingly through the 1940's. Eventually there was an exodus to the City, led by Elizabeth Gilkeson, who thought at first that she could juggle both her Poughkeepsie and her Bank Street jobs, but soon found that impossible. The McElhenys had left, but their influence was still felt when several Day School teachers did their student teaching in Hanna's group at City and Country. Sheila Emerson left. Courtney Cazden left. Herb Barnes came for a few years. Allan Walstrom came and stayed until the school fell apart. Don and Ginger Scott stayed, and so did Frieda Alt and Dee Rittenhouse and my mother, Bee Stone. Marguerite Strehlau stayed until she left to join the Smyths at High Valley. And

Margaret Seymour, the only founding parent still teaching at the school, stayed as well. Eveline Omwake came to run the school, but her first love was the Vassar nursery school which she was in charge of as well.

O: I can remember how devastated we all were when Ibby said she thought she'd move to New York and be full time at Bank Street. But Eveline was also a very exciting director. She was a different kind of director, a lot more organized and intellectual....She was just as warm and supportive, but she didn't have the humor and the lightness-- a kind of a spirit of gaiety. For instance, one of the things I learned about Ibby is that she never made a decision....I still feel you don't have to make a decision if it will take care of itself, and indeed it almost always did. You didn't have to make a decision; in time, whatever was going to happen would happen.

I don't know if Elizabeth Gilkeson would recognize herself in this sympathetic description of a non-decision-maker, but I do know that Olga believes strongly in letting things take their course and seeing what happens. Interestingly, when I interviewed Dee Rittenhouse about Olga, she said that Olga does make decisions, impulsive and arbitrary ones, seemingly just for the sake of getting them out of the way, and with a refusal

to discuss probable outcomes with others. I have seen Olga as a decider and as a non-decider, and I think that this may be a question of two sides of the same coin: this is the way someone who does not believe in decision-making makes decisions-- with eyes shut and holding your nose, you jump in.

Olga's occasionally arbitrary decisions may also be a badge of authority she sometimes flashes, but if that is so, I agree with Herb Barnes that although Olga is a controlling person, she does not do it out of her own need to control, but rather out of her sense that things need to be run.

All of us who went to High Valley Camp, or worked there, remember Olga's sitting in a big chair on the lawn in front of the barn, seemingly doing nothing, and yet being the point of reference that everyone needed. My sister Midge even remembers that when Olga needed to get up, she would leave someone else in the chair to keep a finger on the camp's pulse, to sit in the seat of power and assume some of Olga's authority.

The fact that Olga is so comfortable with her authority and that she is running things more out of a sense that they need running than to satisfy her power needs, means that she is comfortable playing with her authority, in a way that has been profoundly successful with many children. Allan Walstrom reminded me of the boy who was sent to live at the Smyths' and go to the Day School because he would not stay seated at his desk at public school. That year Olga had no desks in her classroom, because desks would have left no room for blocks,

which Olga considered more important. This boy built himself a desk out of blocks, and sat himself down and stayed there. He did not run away from the desk he had struggled to make himself. Herb Barnes reminded me of another boy.

H: Remember Tommy, who could run faster than all the principals in New Haven? [Olga told him] that she'd been under the impression that he did not like school, and she did not like people to be doing things that they really did not like. She did not want him to be in class because she had been told so clearly he wouldn't like it. He ought to be out doing more interesting things like fixing the stone wall and taking care of the horses....He later began asking if he could please come to class and Olga said, "Why, absolutely not! You don't want to go to class, it's just because everybody else is going to class. It's silly for you to go to class. You should be doing the things that you're interested in. What would you like to be doing? Wouldn't you like to fix this wall?" and poor Tommy, back on the wall again. Finally, on bended knee, the kid's asking if he can please go to class, and Olga says, "Well, if you think you have to, why don't you go for about two hours. But no more." In about six months, the New Haven school system couldn't imagine what had happened to their major problem kid. He's busy in school, he's going to class, learning how

to read. Simply because Olga really understood milieu treatment. She has always done what Fritz Redl calls life space counseling.

Eveline Omwake was followed as head of the Day School by two men, first Henry Haskell and then David Clarkson. They were followed briefly by Marguerite Strehlau, who was acting director for an uneasy year before joining the Smyths at High Valley. By the time Marguerite Strehlau became head of the Day School, years of dissension had led the Smyths to separate High Valley from the Day School, with a transition period of several years when a few High Valley boarders still went to the Day School and Julian taught there part time while Olga ran a separate school at High Valley with Mabel Soskin.

After Julian's death in 1968, Olga took over the management aspects of High Valley's administration along with the other functions of leadership she had been carrying out. She had not set out long ago to run her own school, but here was the school which had evolved along with her own style of leadership, and the school needed to be run. Olga was joined soon after Julian's death by two former students, Mack Sotomayor and myself. Dee Rittenhouse came a bit later, after several years at the Randolph School. Mabel Soskin sent a girl named Annie DeHer from St. Maarten to stay with Olga and study in the States. Several years later, Annie and Mack were married. We have all worked together for a long time and have

become part of what makes High Valley unique.

Most important in making High Valley unique is Olga, whose optimism and sense of fun have transformed the lives of hundreds of children. Her own spirit of independence and her memory of what happened in two different schools when that spirit was denied combine to strengthen her tolerance of others. She has a great gift for running things, but she also has the greater gift of stepping back when she sees someone else can do it. She respects other people's styles and encourages them to take charge in their own ways. She is not in the business of turning out little Olga Smyths. She knows that her influence is felt more deeply when people are being truly themselves.

In Conclusion

I cannot penetrate the mystery of Olga Smyth, but I have tried to convey to the reader some of the excitement she carries with her, some of her brilliance in working with children, some of the goodness of High Valley and the other places she has done her work. Olga has told me that she feels lucky. Her life has been interesting; it has been fun.

Olga Smyth has been influenced deeply by her studies at Bank Street and by her long association with other Bank-Street-oriented educators. But as I think about her, and about how in my own work as a teacher I've been influenced as much by my childhood connections as by anything else, I cannot help wondering about the influence on Olga of the Scottish nuns back in Trinidad, about Olga's mother and her journey away from her own culture for the sake of her daughter's education. I think about her grandmother, always sneaking out to water the garden. I think about Olga's brothers and what their part may have been in helping to shape her. I wonder about Olga's absent father and his peculiarly constant presence. I think about Julian Smyth and his devotion to Olga and to the life they made together, and about his death at the age of sixty. I think about their son and his upbringing among his parents' foster children. I think about the generations of students Olga has enjoyed and learned from, and of how many still come

back to see her. I think of Olga's friends of all ages, and of her gardens, her books, her rugs, her stones and shells from everywhere.

I think of all these things and then I think yes, Olga was profoundly influenced by Bank Street, but she brought all these other influences with her as well, just as we all do, to our studies at Bank Street and to our lives with children.