In Memoriam:
Professor Annie Altschul

Annie Altschul died on December 24, 2001, in Edinburgh, Scotland. She was born in Vienna, Austria, on March 18, 1919 and was studying mathematics at the University of Vienna when the Nazi threat forced her widowed mother and children to flee to London for safety. At first, Altschul was not impressed with her new country, finding the British too orderly and “stodgy” (her word). She became a nanny and housemaid and practiced her new language, English.

In that period, there were few options for bright women. She elected to train as a nurse and midwife at the Epsom County Hospital. She found the beginnings of a professional, intellectual match for herself at Mill Hill, an Army Mental Hospital in north London. There she found Maxwell Jones, who headed the hospital and whose aim was to institute the ideology of a therapeutic community for staff and patients. Later, Jones moved to Dingleton Hospital in the Scottish Borders as medical superintendent. Altschul joined him after her move to Scotland (Dopson, 2002). By then, she was Professor of Nursing at Edinburgh University and eager to conduct collaborative research on psychiatric care in communities, with a special focus on needs of elderly people, particularly housing.

Before becoming a professor at Edinburgh, Altschul served as a staff nurse, sister, and principal tutor at the famous Maudsley Hospital in London. While at Maudsley, she studied psychology full time at Birkbeck College, earning a first-class honors degree. Her first book, *Psychiatric Nursing*, was published in 1957 and her second, *Psychology for Nurses*, was published in 1962.

Altschul began her work at Edinburgh in 1964. The Department of Nursing Studies had been established in 1956, despite the opposition of the medical academic community. Largely through Altschul’s energy, insight, and influence, this first full-fledged university-based nursing department became a leader in nursing education in the United Kingdom and Europe. Altschul helped shape the first graduate nursing curriculum. Ironically, she had little patience with the rules of academia and the expectations about curricular methods. She liked to keep it simple, yet challenging, for her students. No one was spared her discerning eye, her sharp wit, her sometimes barbed critical remarks, and her endless questions. She was passionate about obtaining and keeping her students’ attention until she was satisfied that a new idea had occurred or that they had learned something.

In 1976, she became the second Chair of Nursing Studies, a position established 5 years earlier by the University of Edinburgh. This was the first professorship in nursing outside North America. With this appointment came demands for her input as a
member of many distinguished professional, governmental, and organizational committees and commissions. She was a frequent contributor to journals and an active member of the Royal College of Nursing, being designated a Fellow in 1978.

I found it a delight to watch her at professional conferences. If she concluded that the deliberations or discussion had slipped badly, she would rise to her feet, pronounce “hogwash” loudly and leave the room. After some tense chuckling, there was a decided shift in the order of business. In later years, she liked to sit at the back of the room. “That way,” she told me at Oxford, a few years ago, “if I choose not to get engaged with whatever’s happening, I can just slip away.”

In one conversation I had the privilege of participating in, Altschul and Hildegard Peplau discussed the utility of doing “ward studies.” Peplau shared her strategies about conducting observations in day rooms at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey, and Altschul described making the most of coping with a move to smaller accommodations when the wards at Singleton Mental Hospital were being refurbished. Altschul found that in the smaller, tighter space there was more interaction between nurses and patients, less need for medication, and less hyperactivity. She extended these lessons to housing for elderly patients.

Altschul suffered from a major depression when she was in her sixties. As with all aspects of her life, she was open and candid about this. Her willingness to disclose her illness and discuss it culminated in her contribution to a chapter of Wounded Healers in 1985 (Barker, 2002). She joined my husband and me for dinner in her neighborhood one evening and, with amusement, said that she had discovered that heated argument was good for coping with depression. The context was her conversations with her publisher.

Shortly after Altschul’s retirement in 1983, Ann Hargreaves, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Boston Department of Health, interviewed her during the Second International Congress of Psychiatric Nursing. This interview appeared in the January 1984 issue of the Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services (Hargreaves, 1984). Altschul’s political astuteness and wonderful way with words were captured nicely by Hargreaves.

In this issue, Steve Tilley provides a news report of the recent Festschrift honoring Altschul last fall. Alison Tierney (2002) summed up her memories with these words, “She was, in so many ways, a remarkable woman who made a remarkable contribution over the course of her long and active life.

She will be greatly missed, but long remembered” (p. 16).

REFERENCES

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