



The New York Public Library  
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

**Elizabeth Polk papers**

1933-1996

(S)\*MGZMD 312

Compiled by Rachel Schimke, New York University, May 2013.

## Summary

**Creator:** Polk, Elizabeth

**Title:** Elizabeth Polk papers

**Date:** 1933-1996

**Size:** 1.68 linear feet (4 boxes)

**Source:** Donated by Grace Polk, 2002.

**Abstract:** Elizabeth Polk (1902-2001) was an Austrian-American dancer and dance teacher who is considered one of the pioneers of dance therapy. She was particularly renowned for her work with mentally, physically, and behaviorally disabled children. The collection documents the overall evolution of Polk's career from the 1940s (and possibly earlier) to the 1990s, highlighting her work in the fields of dance, dance therapy, and dance education.

**Access:** Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:  
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

**Conditions Governing Use:** For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

**Preferred citation:** Elizabeth Polk papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library.

**Processing note:** Materials were arranged alphabetically by document type. Photographs were arranged by the donor according to the schools where Elizabeth Polk taught, and this order has been maintained in the overall arrangement. Prior to processing, an open-reel videotape was removed for cataloging. During processing, two songbooks and a small run of The Dancer's Notebook were removed and returned to the Library for the Performing Arts. Compiled by Rachel Schimke, New York University, May 2013. Compiled by Rachel Schimke, New York University, May 2013.

**Related Materials:**

Grace Polk Family Collection, AR 25104. Leo Baeck Institute.

**Creator History**

Elizabeth Polk, née Sofer, (1902-2001) is considered one of the pioneers of dance therapy. She was born in Vienna, Austria in 1902. From the 1910s through the 1930s, she studied ballet, modern dance, gymnastics, piano, and music education. Polk eventually became a concert dancer in Vienna and also toured in Czechoslovakia and throughout Austria. She obtained her teaching license in 1933 and began teaching dance classes in Vienna. In 1938, on the verge of World War II, Polk and her husband left Austria for the United States.

Polk resumed teaching in 1948, after settling in the United States and giving birth to her daughter, Grace. She established her own studio in the Sunnyside neighborhood of Queens, New York, where she taught classes for children as well as adults. Over the next two decades, Polk also taught: at summer camps, including Camp T-Ledge in Maine and the Daycroft School in Connecticut; adult and family classes in creative dance in Levittown, Long Island; and workshops for dance counselors at the Young Men-Young Women's Hebrew Association (Y.M.-Y.W.H.A.) in New York City. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Polk began working with children with physical, mental, and behavioral disabilities. In 1957, she became a regional dance instructor at the Lexington School for the Deaf, and in 1962 she became a dance and movement therapist for the Childville School, a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children. In 1958, Polk co-founded the National Dance Teacher's Guild.

Polk was a staff member at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y. from 1959 to 1984, working for the university's Children's Center for Creative Arts and periodically as an assistant professor in the dance and physical education departments. From 1965 to 1991, she was also a dance and movement therapist at the Life Line Center for Child Development in Jamaica, Queens. Polk was one of the founding members of the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) in 1966, a professional organization which creates and maintains standards for practicing dance therapists and dance therapy education. In the early 1970s, Polk taught at the Gateway School for children with learning disabilities in Manhattan. From the 1960s through the 1980s, Polk gave demonstrations and taught workshops and courses at numerous universities, community centers, and professional association meetings. She also published many articles, including the seminal 1974 article "Dance Therapy with Special Children," and produced three musical records to be used in children's dance classes. In 1995, she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the ADTA in recognition of her contributions to the field of dance therapy.

Polk died in October 2001 in New York, N.Y. at age 99.

**Scope and Content Note**

The collection chronicles Elizabeth Polk's work in dance, dance therapy, and dance education, as well as the overall evolution of her career. The collection consists of documents created or collected by Polk in the course of teaching classes, attending and/or presenting at conferences, conducting research for publications or courses, and generally staying abreast of her fields of interest. Though the collection spans from the 1930s to the 1990s, most of the materials date from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Polk's involvement in dance and dance therapy is primarily revealed through the scrapbooks and subject files she maintained. The scrapbooks and subject files are comprised of programs, certificates, manuscripts of Polk's articles and addresses, teaching materials, clippings, publicity materials, and

correspondence. Programs, clippings, and other publicity materials document Polk's own classes and workshops as well the work of other dancers. Correspondence in these files is between Polk and her employers, colleagues, professional organizations, and dance students and their parents. Two subject files pertain specifically to Polk's work at Adelphi University, documenting her course on the history of dance and a training course she delivered to Taiwanese teachers. Another subject file contains programs, catalogs, pamphlets, and flyers from various conferences and workshops related to dance, music, physical education, and/or disabled children. Researchers should note that some materials may be duplicated across multiple scrapbooks, subject files, and other parts of the collection.

The collection also includes some of Polk's published writings on using dance therapy with disabled children, as well as biographical materials such as resumes and retrospective articles on her career. Five notebooks in German may date from her 1927-1934 study with Hedwig Müller at the School for Movement Study, and other notes appear to be ideas for a book. Photographs, negatives, and contact sheets depict Polk and her students taking part in dance exercises at the various schools where Polk taught or demonstrated. Photographs are arranged alphabetically by institution name.

Polk's interests in the wider worlds of dance and education are reflected in her collection of programs from dance performances and course catalogs for dance classes. She also collected songbooks and teaching guides, likely for use in her classes. Press and promotional material relates to Polk's workshops and an audio record she produced for children's dance classes. Children's artwork from Polk's students is also present.

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' dance research collection includes additional materials related to Elizabeth Polk. Photographs, video recordings, accompaniment music, and clippings can be found by conducting separate author and subject searches for "Polk, Elizabeth" in the library's catalog.

**Arrangement:** The collection is arranged alphabetically by document type.

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

Dance -- Study and teaching  
Dance therapy

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Photographs

### **Names**

Adelphi University  
American Dance Therapy Association

## Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical Materials 1950s-1990s
- b. 1 f. 2 Children's Art circa 1984
- b. 1 f. 3 Conference Proceedings--Music in Special Education 1971 April
- b. 1 f. 4 Conference Proceedings--Physical Education for the Handicapped 1972  
October
- b. 1 f. 5 Course Catalogs 1955-1967
- b. 1 f. 6-7 Notes undated
- b. 1 f. 8-15 Photographs--Adelphi University - Gateway School 1949-1980
- b. 2 f. 1-8 Photographs--Levittown - Young Men-Young Women's Hebrew Association  
1940-1980
- b. 2 f. 9 Press and Promotional Material 1954-1979
- b. 2 f. 10 Programs 1940s-1950s
- b. 2 f. 11 Published Writings 1968-1988
- b. 2 f. 12-13 Scrapbooks 1941-1990
- b. 3 f. 1-2 Scrapbooks 1941-1990
- b. 3 f. 3 Songbooks 1933, 1940, 1948
- Subject Files
- b. 3 f. 4-7 General 1938-1996
- b. 4 f. 1-3 General 1938-1996
- b. 4 f. 4-5 Adelphi University 1967-1980
- b. 4 f. 6 Conferences and Workshops 1970-1980
- b. 4 f. 7 Teaching Guides 1968-1981