

An Interview with Margret Meyerkort

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I asked Margret Meyerkort if she would be willing to be interviewed for Kindling, and after much persuasion, she agreed. I visited her lovely home, and, over rosehip juice and nibbles, Margret spoke to me briefly about some of the background, history and some events during her many years as a Steiner Waldorf kindergarten teacher and trainer. Our conversation was so interesting and informative, that I often forgot to take notes, and I left feeling that we had only just touched the surface of Margret's fascinating life, so I will call this a "potted history" and hope that one day we may hear more from Margret, who kindly corrected my notes for me.

Margret came to England in 1950 from Switzerland (where as a nurse she had cared for an epileptic boy) to be trained as a Steiner Waldorf school class teacher at Hawkwood College in Stroud. The founder of Hawkwood College was Margaret Bennell, a friend of Margaret McMillan and a co-founder of Wynstones School. Among the other tutors were Dr. Ernst Lehrs and Dr. Maria Roeschl, both of whom had been direct students of Rudolf Steiner.

In 1953, Dr. Maria Glas, one of the two school doctors at Wynstones School, asked Margret if she would become the kindergarten teacher there. She agreed to help them out for a year, after which she hoped to become a class teacher. Three years later, a class teaching position became available, but Margret had grown to enjoy the particular creativity of kindergarten work and was intrigued to continue finding out what Rudolf Steiner had meant by stating that the teacher of the young child is like a priest.

At first, the kindergarten was in a wooden hut on the grounds of the school's hostel, one mile's walk from the school. The large room with a pitched ceiling had an iron stove. Margret had to light the fire at 7:00 a.m. after one hour's bus journey from her accommodation near Nailsworth, Stroud. She had carried over wood and coal from the hostel yard the previous evening. Kindergarten hours were 9:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Children brought their own sandwiches and had a rest after lunch.

After two years, Rudi Lissau, an upper school teacher, spoke of the importance of integrating the kindergarten into the life of the school, and the kindergarten was moved into what had been the staff room on the ground floor of the main building.

Margret's understanding of education and of life came out of her inner work and her studies of Rudolf Steiner's work. For instance, one day she read in one of his karma lectures, that the "stars are gateways to the spiritual world." Out of this study, she designed her Advent calendar, which was added to her classroom. Then she read that the straw of the wheat is condensed sunlight, so she made the bowls for two doll's prams out of thick wheat-straw. While studying nutrition and the development of the teeth, she gave the children biodynamic carrots and another year a mussel shell full of biodynamic wheat grains as part of their snack on Mondays. When she read about the activity of the spirit of a language, she studied English nursery songs and nursery rhymes and used these frequently in the kindergarten.

Priorities became difficult for Margret: especially on the occasion when Dr. Glas needed help in his nursing home in Stroud; when the school hostel needed help with a dormitory for lower school boys; when the school needed the city children to be supervised on the public transport bus into Gloucester; when mothers asked for help with birthday celebrations, at home, with sick children; and, last but by no means least, there was the participation in activities of the Anthroposophical Society. Fortunately, she had thirty to fifty minutes rest with the children after lunch, and occasionally went to sleep, too.

In 1953, Wynstones School had an Advent Festival for classes 1 to 4, a Christmas Festival for the kindergarten and a Midsummer Festival for classes 8 to 12. By 1980, the school had an Advent Festival for the kindergarten, as well. Sometimes, children of the Junior School Orchestra played the bamboo pipes which they had made in lessons and Swedish canteles, (a

forerunner of the kinderharp, which were made by older-children in woodwork lessons), and there was a Midsummer Festival for the whole school. (The kindergarten celebrated it partly independently). Then there were those festivals for the whole school which had grown out of kindergarten festivals as the children had moved into the classes, all of which the kindergarten continued to celebrate independently: a Whitsun Festival which had been helped by Eileen Hutchins, founder of the Elmfield School, Stourbridge; a Maypole Festival; an Autumn/Michaelmas Festival, (the Michaelic aspect with the help of Peter Roth, one of the founders of the Camphill Schools). Lastly, there were the following festivals for the kindergarten only: Snowdrop Day, a Spring/Easter Festival, an end-of-the-year-festival, and September/October lantern walks following the Autumn/Michaelmas Festival. In 1958, to mark Wynstones 21st birthday, Margret started what has since been called the Christmas Market.

For many years, the kindergarten, like the rest of the school, had parents' evenings every term in addition to home visits. The parents' evening in the summer term developed into a special meeting in that it prepared the handing over of the so-called "schoolchildren" to their class teacher-to-be (if she/he could be present) at the end-of-the-year festival.

In 1963, Margret took an unpaid sabbatical year and joined the second year students of Else Klink's Eurythmy School in Koengen, near Stuttgart. Since the inception of Wynstones School in 1937, the kindergarten had not had eurythmy. Wynstones' eurythmist, who had been trained in Dornach in the early 1920's said that of the "four different eurythmy's, the eurythmy for the young child was the most difficult." Together with what Margret had learned from previous courses in England and ongoing courses she was taking after the year with Else Klink, she risked giving the children the little eurythmy she could, appreciating that fully trained eurythmists did not approve.

In the mid 1960's, Dr. von Kugelgen (founder and head of the International Kindergarten Association for many years) asked Margret to bring the kindergarten teachers working in

Great Britain together, and the Kindergarten Steering Group was formed under the heading of the Steiner Schools Fellowship. For several years, it consisted of Stella Jarman from Michael Hall, Joan Marcus from Elmfield, Stourbridge, Eileen Simon from The New School, King's Langley and Margret, from Wynstones. They represented all the kindergarten teachers in the country, were in regular contact with them and organized conferences which helped to inform their teaching.

A year after Francis Edmunds began the Teacher Training Course at Emerson College, he asked Margret to give a one week course on "living with the young child," as he put it. Although Edmunds asked Margret to come to Emerson and work there with him, she felt that if she gave up her direct contact with children her work as a trainer would be out of touch. However, she continued the annual work at Emerson College and took students on for their practicum experience.

In the mid 1960's, Cecily Thatcher, a trainer from the Montessori College in Johannesburg, South Africa, came to Wynstones to work with Margret for a year. On her return to Johannesburg, Cecily opened her kindergarten and subsequent school. A few years later, Margret went to Johannesburg and Cape Town for nine months. This was the beginning of Margret's international work.

In 1977, Francis Edmunds had students who wanted to go into kindergarten work. He advised Margret to start a training course. She discussed the question with Dr. von Kugelgen, who encouraged her to get colleagues from Wynstones to help. The training course began in 1978 with seventeen students and ran for fifteen years. It was always supported by the International Kindergarten Association in Stuttgart. During these years Margret was one of the contributors at the annual teachers' conferences in Hannover, Germany. She tried to be innovative every year, giving, for instance, a workshop on the ninth Lesson of the School of Spiritual Science in relation to the education of the young child.

In the mid 1980's, Margret and Frances Wolls of Wynstones School began the Teacher Education Circle. Karla Kinniger from Edinburgh and representatives from other training courses joined them, including Emerson College, Elmfield School, King's Langley and others.

Margret stopped working in the kindergarten in Wynstones in 1980, but continued lecturing and training around the world. To mark the occasion of the first kindergarten teachers' conference in North America, she offered a puppet play of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" with four string puppets, which she showed by herself, and a lecture "How Can We Work with the Karma of the Young Child?" (The lecture has recently been re-edited and published by WECAN in The Gateways Series, Volume 2; *Working with the Angels: The Young Child and the Spiritual World.*)

Margret co-authored *The Challenge of the Will* together with Rudi Lissau which was published in 2000 by RSCP. Her last public workshop was given at the regional conference in Hereford in the spring of 2002. For her it was a new approach to the needs of the young child; "Education as a Question of Relating"

(published in KINDLING, Issue 2, and *Gateways* Fall/Winter 2002, Issue 43). Margret has now officially retired from her work of lecturing, giving workshops and visiting kindergartens.

Out of my own interest in the subject, I asked Margret about puppetry. She spoke about her developing in the late 1970's what has come to be called in America the "story apron." She understood Rudolf Steiner to have meant that the importance of this pedagogical tool was to support rhythm in the development of the young child, contraction and expansion. She therefore considered the size, colour, design, etc. of the story apron in response to his pedagogical indications.

Recently, Margret took all her notes and recycled them. At my expressed horror, she explained that every generation of teachers needs to be free to develop pedagogy out of an evolving spiritual science.

This article was originally published in Kindling, of which Janni Nicol is the editor.