

Pictures from Norway

• Louise deForest

In early May, 2009, I found myself waiting to meet Susan Howard in the airport of Oslo, Norway. We were on our way to Arendahl, a small, seaside town close to the southern tip of Norway and we had come to speak (along with Ann Sharfman, from South Africa) at their national early childhood association yearly conference. These yearly conferences are held in different schools each year and the school hosting this particular conference, Stjerneglimt (Star Glitter, or Shine) was also celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Founded by Eldbjorg Paulssen, who still teaches there, it is now home to infants through five-year-olds. When we attended an Open House there, we met several young mothers who themselves had been children there in the early years of the school.

My first impression of Norway was that of granite, pushing the land into jutting mountains, steep hills and rock-strewn valleys. It is no wonder that the Norwegians became a seafaring people—the land looked impossible to farm! Trees are tall, forests dense, and the rock, almost like a sleeping beast just under the surface, always present. I understood all the trolls and giants in Norse tales now that I had seen this rugged and wild landscape.

The early childhood conference was held on a lovely island accessible by bridge and dotted with old army barracks and halls dating back to the Second World War. It is a small island but spacious enough to host several events at once and our neighbors were, much to our amusement, a large motorcycle club and a working dog show.

Approximately 250 teachers came to the conference, enthusiasm and good will as obvious on their faces as on the ones I see in our own North American EC conference every year. Luckily, almost everyone in Norway also speaks English—and often very, very well—so we were able to meet and speak to many teachers before

going on to the IASWECE Council meeting held a few days later in Oslo.

The Waldorf school movement began in Norway in the same year as it began in North America: 1926. Rudolf Steiner first spoke in Norway in 1921 and the resounding echo in the souls of those present was strong enough to found the first school in Oslo. The first kindergarten was founded in 1932 by Gulle Brun, a eurythmist and faculty member in the first school, whose work and vision still inspire teachers today. The schools grew slowly until 1970 when the Norwegian government passed legislation to subsidize all schools, public and independent, which led to the rapid founding and growth of many new Waldorf schools.

Today there are approximately sixty kindergarten programs, serving about 1,300 children and their families (there are just over four million people in Norway). For many years, the early childhood programs formed part of the National Waldorf School Association but in 1997 the Norwegian Waldorf Early Childhood Association was formed. Like our WECAN, the Norwegian EC Association hosts conferences, publishes newsletters (four times a year), engages in research and keeps a finger on the pulse of childhood within Norway. Currently, Mette Johannessen, a longtime kindergarten teacher in Oslo, represents Norway on the IASWECE Council.

Some of the burning issues facing our EC colleagues in Norway are similar to the challenges we are familiar with here in North America; others, however, are particular to Norway and perhaps to Europe in general. One of the big questions living among early childhood teachers and class teachers is the six-year-old groups. In an effort to delay the entrance into first grade until a child reaches seven years old, special classes have been introduced for the six-year-olds. These

classes are called first grade in Norway, but the hope and intention has been to have these classes remain play-based groups for older kindergarten children. Because these classes are subsidized by the government (and nursery and kindergarten classes are not), the six-year-old groups are now increasingly part of the elementary schools, which has many EC teachers concerned. Finding capable and knowledgeable teachers to carry these classes is challenging, and the elementary schools for the most part offer little guidance for the content of these programs. As one kindergarten teacher told me, "Each person does their own thing; sometimes it feels like a kindergarten but mostly it feels like just another grade in the school." For this reason, the quality of these programs varies widely; the early childhood association did write guidelines for these programs but because they do not take place in kindergartens, the guidelines rarely reach the teachers who need them. Many EC teachers fear that these classes serve to give the children a head start into the grades, with numeracy and literacy taking precedence over the envisioned play-based program.

All the kindergarten teachers I spoke with felt that the same-age class is an unhealthy social situation for the older children, who no longer have the opportunity to be "big brothers and sisters" to the younger children, and many teachers felt that, being a part of the elementary school left the six-year-olds unprotected and in a position to try to keep up with the older children on the playground. Just a month or so ago I heard that the government will no longer be subsidizing these older-child groups, so it is now a question whether they will return to the kindergarten programs or become a real first grade.

On the other end of the spectrum, younger children are now entering into the Waldorf Early Childhood programs in record numbers, often as young as months old. Norway offers long maternity and paternity leaves to new parents (imagine!), but once a child has turned one, the expectation is that the parents will reenter the work force full time. Today, 98% of all one-year-olds are in some kind of institutional care setting, often for full days. None of us in the early childhood would agree that this is a healthy situation for the child or for the family, but this is

a reality in many countries and now the question becomes how to make this long day as stress-free and as healthy as possible. I saw many nap rooms, with cradles and carriages and little beds covered with quilts and draped with soft cloths in all the schools I visited. Here, too, finding capable caregivers is a huge challenge and establishing the essential elements of a healthy program for this age in all the schools and programs has yet to be done. Full-time and part-time teacher training is offered in Norway but there are no courses or trainings for the care of the very young child, which is now a task for the EC Association to address.

Innovative work is happening among anthroposophical initiatives and the Anthroposophical Society as they become more united and more visible in the broader community. Last year, in a gesture of sharing and reaching out, a cultural gathering took place outside of City Hall in downtown Oslo, completely open to the public. Various workshops were offered, as were classes of eurythmy, performances of plays, art exhibits, agricultural expositions and a lecture in the very lively Literature House close by. The practical and more esoteric aspects of the School of Spiritual Science were freely shared. It was such a successful gathering, and so much fun for everyone involved, that another gathering is planned for this autumn, with the theme of the economic situation in the world.

The Waldorf Teachers' Conferences are also changing in nature. The one last year was opened to Waldorf teachers, parents, public school teachers and professionals in diverse fields, and the keynote speakers and workshop leaders were renowned experts in their fields and came from outside of the Waldorf perspective. This, too, proved to be a rewarding experience for all those involved and the conferences will continue in this direction, bringing together all those who are actively working toward the future and the well-being of the next generation.

I left Norway on May 17, the Independence Day of Norway . . . bigger than Christmas, one Norwegian told me. Having grown up with the flag waving, veterans marching, military parade version of Independence Day, I found the Norwegian celebration a very pleasant

surprise. Preparations begin many days before the celebration, and in Oslo I saw many soldiers sweeping the sidewalks and streets, pruning bushes, and making everything beautiful. Everything closes on this day, most streets are for pedestrian use only, and there is an air of great joy and celebration everywhere. This is a festival by and for the children and on THE day, children in traditional Norwegian dress gather together, their arms full of flowers, and walk to the King and Queen's castle, in the center of Oslo, and

give the flowers to them. As they walk up the long, lilac-bordered road, they sing joyful songs, and are joined by the adults standing along the sides of the roads, also dressed in traditional Norwegian clothes, waving boughs of flowers and singing along with the children. It is a thoroughly peaceful, joyful celebration of not only Norway's independence from Sweden, but, more importantly, the great gift of the future of Norway as embodied by their children.