Waldorf Education in Hungary

• **Louise deForest**

Budapest. The name alone gives rise to flights of fantasy. As I walk the streets here, I am struck by the complexity of these two cities—Buda and Pest—divided by the quiet, deep waters of the Danube. Much of Buda is a World Heritage Site and walking along the cobblestone streets it's easy to get a sense of how life was 150 years ago. Budapest's former reputation as a cultural center lives on in the ornate architecture on both sides of the river. Exquisite ironwork supports the balconies and the doorways, there are friezes, art-deco doors, free-standing sculptures, fountains, domes, palaces and churches everywhere, not to mention the grand hotels, slowly and quietly deteriorating here and there around the city. At night, with all the spires and domes, castles, bridges and palaces illuminated and reflected in the Danube, I feel as if I have entered a fairy tale and there is no more beautiful place on earth.

However, when I take a closer look, a different picture emerges, perhaps a less romanticized one. These beautiful buildings, which have stood the test of time, have also stood the test of history; many of the facades of the houses, storefronts and stations are pock-marked by bullet holes and mortar shells and the stormy, not-so-distant past comes into the daily reality of Budapest. Especially heart-wrenching were the metal casts of shoes lining the walkway on the Pest side of the Danube, a war memorial to all those who removed their shoes before being shot and thrown into the river.

Into this tortured history, Waldorf education has entered and taken root. The Fall, 2010 IASWECE meeting was held just outside of Budapest in Nagycovacski, once a village and now a suburb of Budapest. Each house in this quiet suburb has a substantial yard behind it, filled with vegetable gardens, fruit, and especially walnut and chestnut trees; and by each front door there are profusely blooming flower gardens. While the Council was there we had an opportunity to attend the teacher training seminar in a nearby town and to meet several leaders of Waldorf education in Hungary.

Waldorf education is on the threshold of adulthood in Hungary. The first Waldorf school was established in 1989, and there are now 44 kindergartens and 26 schools. There was very dynamic growth in the first years of Waldorf schools; but lately the growth has diminished, mostly due to a strained economy. State funding of schools has been reduced—the state now only pays one seventh of a school's expenses, with tuition now covering the rest—while the constraints have increased and recent laws have made it more and more difficult for Waldorf Schools to be self-determining. Waldorf schools in Hungary are struggling to survive. The upside of this challenge is that parents and teachers are working ever more closely together. All our meals during the Council meeting were made by parents, and during our meeting we were treated to a lovely puppet show, also performed by parents.

Most schools belong to the Federation of Waldorf Schools, created as an umbrella organization to support not only the Waldorf schools but all work coming out of anthroposophy—therapeutic eurythmy, Böthmer Gymnastics, extra lesson work, biodynamic agriculture, and teacher training. Unfortunately, the Federation has been plagued by conflicts and a perceived lack of clarity, which has given rise to many misunderstandings. Schools have also been hard-pressed to pay the yearly dues. Several years ago, a group was given a mandate to transform the organizational structure of the Federation and, while it is still a work in progress, membership is open to all schools in the country now and the dues are voluntary contributions. Within the Federation, a group of teachers is actively involved in creating criteria which schools must meet to be able to call themselves Waldorf Schools, much along the lines of what AWSNA and WECAN have been doing in North America. Unfortunately, there are very few, if any, early childhood teachers participating in this group; most early childhood programs are isolated, stand-alone kindergartens with a lead teacher and an assistant teacher in each group, making it difficult for a teacher to be away from her class.

Council members, during our visit to the Teacher Training Seminar, had the opportunity to attend a lecture given by Tamás Verkerdy, a clinical child psychologist and former Waldorf class teacher, and presently an advocate for Waldorf education in conversations with the Hungarian government, as well as a teacher in the Seminar. He reminded us that the fact that we are entering the age of the Consciousness Soul does not mean we are getting better; it means we are becoming more anti-social. If Waldorf education is to succeed in this century, he says, we must follow Rudolf Steiner's advice to become citizens of the world. He reminded us that Michael is a cosmopolitan Being, open to many ways of being and doing and embracing a world-wide reality. He drew our attention to two polarities: "Be who you want to be and I'll support you" (a Michaelic gesture) and, "Be who I want you to be and I will help you become that," a gesture he sees in some of the Waldorf schools and in education in general. He emphasized the fact that in Waldorf schools, the main person in the school is the child (not the teacher, as is true in many other forms of education) and our Waldorf principles should meet the child, not the other way around.

Of course, teacher training plays a huge role in the preparation of the next generation of Waldorf teachers. Here, too, Waldorf education is greatly challenged. Up until now, Waldorf schools and seminars have been free to determine the curriculum for teacher training and set teacher qualifications; but this is about to change. In spite of the fact that teacher training initially began with the early childhood training, it is the only training program not accredited by the State; even trainings to become a co-worker in Camphill Communities or in eurythmy are accredited. However, the full-time training can no longer support itself without some radical changes; one idea is to have teacher training become part of the State Technical University, which has many branches and may afford the possibility of full-time accredited teacher training programs. And there is also active work towards the early childhood training becoming fully accredited with the State.

Full-time teacher training (started in 1996) for all teachers is four years long and a B.A. is a prerequisite. There are also several part-time options available, including evening programs, which meet several times a month and then gather for a summer camp of several weeks, much like the part-time trainings we are familiar with in this country. And, as elsewhere, the questions of how we prepare teachers to meet the need for clear communication, creative discipline in the classroom, and conflict management are ongoing, as is the question of how, once trained, teachers can create new methods and solutions.

Most young children attend some kind of State-run early childhood program before coming into a Waldorf program; most parents work full time after their children are three (maternity leave is three years in Hungary, though there is a movement to reduce that time) but most Waldorf early childhood programs do not offer spaces for children under four. They also do not usually offer afternoon care for children, believing that home is the best place for these young children. This translates into fewer families being able to opt for the choice of a Waldorf School for their young child, and it also means that the schools do not get any funding from the State. Dr. Verkerdy pleaded with the early childhood teachers to reconsider their position, both to support the needs of families with children and for the life of their schools and programs. Among the early childhood teachers and students there was much resistance to this idea, and I was reminded of similar conversations we had in our schools back in the early nineties.

As in many of the European Waldorf Schools, the State sets the age for children to enter first grade. Until fairly recently, children had to be seven years old during their first grade year to go to first grade; now, however, it has been reduced to six and, following the trends in many other places, may soon be reduced even further.

On the bright side, Waldorf education has had a positive impact on public education in Hungary. Not long ago, the state curriculum was rewritten and many of the people who had input into the changes were Waldorf parents. Although perhaps with a different interpretation than in Waldorf schools, the State education now emphasizes free play and kinesthetic learning in the early years, and more and more State school psychologists are referring children and their families to Waldorf schools.

In a country that lost 71% of its land and 66% of its population after World War One, that was occupied by first the Germans and then, in 1947, by the Communist regime, and whose last uprising was in 1989, Waldorf Education offers an antidote to the troubled past and provides an opportunity to strengthen the cultural richness of these proud, courageous and passionate people.

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