

Angels and Star-Children: An Excursion to Their Workshop

by
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Translated by Ben and Estelle Emmett

We are sitting in a bus and riding through District 4 of Zurich, Switzerland. I am returning to the schoolhouse for children from around the world. This time the windows are full of stars, falling heavily from the sky: big white snowflakes. With me in the bus is a group of students from Dornach. Expectant, they are looking forward to this visit to an extraordinary Zurich schoolhouse. They have read the interview with Ms. Koller. “We want to visit this teacher and her children!” was the unanimous declaration in the full-time course of the Upper Technical School for Anthroposophical Pedagogy in Dornach.

Soon they sit, a dozen students, in a very ordinary room of the public school and observe the teaching of the teacher. It is an ordinary room, but the teaching is extraordinary, teaching inspired with artistic-life-activity through which the children blend visibly with the teacher into a higher unity. The individual sections of the rhythmical whole are brief, and each child takes part in full of devotion. Afterwards they go to the main room for rhythmic instruction.

The rhythm teacher is also a great educator-artist. She includes us in the teaching. Soon we are jumping around the room hand in hand with the children, full of buoyancy to the beautiful melodies of her piano playing – the student from Angola paired with a child from Kosovo, the student from Petersburg with the boy from Turkey, the student from Iran with a girl from Sri Lanka. On our arrival the children pointed with joy to our student from Africa and yelled loudly, “Africa!” Only the music, movement, and concentration are important.

Later, back in the classroom, the students sit with the children, the atmosphere is focussed; everybody embroiders pictures. I sit next to the delicate blonde girl from Albania. “Do you want to try it too?” she asks. She is happy with the way I decorate the hem of her Angel with golden stitches – the needle pierces into the dark fabric and then appears again; again it goes into the dark, again it appears in the light. All of the students are sitting with the children or standing with the teacher and all are observing how she helps the children, so that beautiful embroidered pictures grow almost like miracles under their hands. It is a world full of colors, animals, trees and flowers, angels, heaven and earth, legends and memories of life – everything joins together through this artistic activity into a wholeness.

Then comes the noon break with a “pedagogical intensive course”; the children are in the nursery or have gone home, and we sit together for an improvised picnic. For the other Russian students Olga translates everything that Ms. Koller tells from her rich experience so that nothing is lost. During this seminar lesson the students hear an experienced teacher give her profound insights engagingly, spontaneously and with originality. The depth of Anthroposophy as a source for teaching becomes comprehensible for the students.

The Iranian student brings up question after question; she wants to know how it goes with the education of Muslim children in a Swiss school. And Ms. Koller answers with seriousness and humor, relates examples of how she, because she studies both sacred books, the Bible and the Koran, often spontaneously tries to solve difficult problems. For example, when a strict Muslim father wanted to forbid his little daughter from taking swimming lessons, Ms. Koller sent him home with: “Ask Allah whether He will save your child if she falls into the water and can’t swim. Tell me tomorrow Allah’s answer.” The next day he was there: “Allah will only save her when she can swim.” “You see – Allah is good.” It is important to include and respect the faith of the parents, she adds. And that is why there is a calendar hanging in the room on which the festivals of all religions are posted – the holy days of the Christians, the Muslims, and the Hindus. (That way she also knows why certain children are absent.)

We look at photo albums and see one of her pupils in the colorful Tamil festival. We look at the beautiful drawings by the children of Christophorus, embroidered pictures of kings, angels, squirrels, sheep, and flowering meadows.

We recall the hopping, singing, colorful throng of children in the morning, and it is suddenly clear to all: the star children are everywhere; they come like wonderful snowflakes to earth, not to specially selected places, but we recognize that they are here before us in these gray-painted public schools. They are of all skin-colors, speak all the languages of the world, but above all they all speak the language of the heart. Met with intelligent and instructive words from the grownups, the children are nevertheless often distrustful, having already known disappointment frequently in their short lives; they have been strongly shocked by evil, stirred up, wounded and attacked. And yet, their trust in the Earth Star and its inhabitants is unshakable. They seek other warm souls, grownups in whom the Star Child in the manger has become inner experience and life goal.

A wish is expressed that all of these millions and millions of Star Children throughout the world will find grownups who will understand them, who have compassion for them and stand up for them like this teacher in an ordinary, but so extraordinary school...for is not every child a Star Child?

Back home I recollected the poem by Rudolf Meyer which he, in Advent mood, dedicated to the arriving Star Souls:

O consoling flake – you talk of manger-joy.
The Virgin muses;
for silver laughing nears . . .
Crystal Heaven, open up and send to Earth the Star Souls.

The technique

The original drawing is transferred with wax crayon onto burlap and then stretched over a wooden frame. Then work then begins with thick, large needles and many colors. The types of stitches are free choice. Each child works daily at it for about twenty minutes. It is completed in about half a year. Each picture has its story, like each child. The works are not intended for sale.

How did the Angel pictures begin?

For thirteen years I attempted with my class to live Waldorf education. Our foreign child quota is about one hundred percent. The school district declared us to be a disaster zone. One aspect of this work is challenging, but on the other hand rewarding.

The first graders attend school up to seven hours daily, and they tend to fight when they are tired. So we began to embroider: animals, humans, and dwarves were some of the subjects. Sometime in between, the first Angel picture was created. Subsequently, many more were created. I wanted to build bridges between cultures, religions, nationalities, Swiss and foreigners, children and adults, between people who deny the Spirit and the ones who seek Him.

We have received many enthusiastic responses. If the Angel pictures could contribute to the intensity of the form-giving element, I would be delighted. The Swiss churches at the EXPO 2002 showed these works under the name of “Un Ange Passe” (An Angel Is Passing).

Monday morning

(The school grounds had been rented out for weekend entertainment.)

Watch out for Monday morning – a fiery surprise – a glistening white sheet of light on the surface of a lake. Courage, strength are needed.

Red Bull® cans are lying around the school yard, Alco Pop bottles are in the trash cans. In the school’s entry hall a sweetish smell wafts toward you. It is a scene like after a bomb attack. Black cloths are hanging around like dead birds. Fortunately, the laser sphere and music boxes are already gone.

You should have known this – have you already forgotten Friday evening? An innocent little finger pushes on one of those tempting plastic knobs and the hell-machine blasts forth. Small children fled in panic, are not to be found. You yourself take flight. There is no way to start work. The school yard is crowded with children asking: “When does the TEKKNO Party start?” “I don’t know. But surely this is not something of interest for you?” Their glances indicate: Aren’t you naïve!

In the restaurant at the corner of the street sits the manager, the initiator of the weekend parties. "A child started the music." He only nods. "A bright morning without sorrows follows the dark night!"

Gather the trash, clean up, air out. The school bell rings. There they are already, full of expectation. Please, no long ceremony! They push forward into action; just don't ask about the weekend – there would be no end with the garbage. Time is precious; I have ten minutes to introduce something new for the day. Thereafter, breathe out, breathe out!

On the next weekend: Red Bull® with whiskey, \$7.00. Hoopah Hooge® \$5.00. I wish this story were not true!

How can one know when it is eight o'clock?

What a silly question! One looks at the clock. Clear? Clear! At this my story should end – a short story. Let me tell you the reality.

School starts at eight o'clock. All children are there. One of these three sentences is the right one – which one? Mark it! Did you mark the last one? Then you were good. The school cannot start. The children are not there. That's how it goes since summer. Now we have autumn. For a quarter of a year the same game.

One child is there. I already have the telephone list in my hand. "Come. Amed, we will go and call. Whom do you want to call first?" "Nasi and Lirim." "Tell them in your language that they should come to school immediately. Dial 4-2-1-8-6-3-5." It does not work. Of course not; he still does not know all the numbers. I write them down for him; now he manages.

Amed does not say much, he nods his head and hangs up. Nasim will come and Lirim. Of course, they live in the same house.

I keep going. The next call is for Noran. She is Turkish. A sleepy woman's voice keeps saying, "School? School? Noran?" Then just a hum. For Mohamed, the Berber, I conjured up a French sentence. I hear a whiney little voice: "You know I am sick. Mami went to work." "And where is your daddy?" "I don't know." "Take care of yourself. Stay in bed." I call the Childcare: "Where is Aida?" "We sent her off at eight o'clock." I look out into the recreation area. She sits on a swing. "Amed, go and get her." "And Alexander?" "Oh yes, he had a dentist appointment today." Now it is just Sandra who is missing. Nobody answers the phone. Amed arrives with Aida. We four go to the classroom and meet a crying Sandra in front of the door. "My Mami had to take my little sister to the Kindergarten." Soon afterwards our two Kosovo Albanians, Nasi and Lirim arrive, with empty stomachs. Most children don't eat breakfast. Should I reintroduce our common breakfast?

Today we are lucky, we can start school at 9:15 AM and can omit the walk around the building. Forty-five minutes are left for work.

Soon will be the parents' visiting day. My little translators explain to their Mamis with serious faces: "School – learn; no school – no learn, no second grade."

I bought twelve alarm clocks at the supermarket. They are cheaper by the dozen. It wasn't the best idea – why? I think: I still have to invest in many things so that these children will learn arithmetic and how to read and write. Equality, same choice for everybody – what does this mean?

Escaping the grounds of Zurich

A few years ago I saw a sign that said: “Escaping the Grounds of Zurich.” I did not understand this sign. Who would want to escape this worldly, open, dynamic, beautiful city situated between a lake and the mountains? But one week before Christmas I myself am in this position. I wrack my brain with the question: Where do I go with the small children on the last day of school in the old year? Because this is a Fest – festa (in Albanian), sarecanost (in Serbian), eglence (in Turkish). There is an announcement in the paper to the population:

School New Year celebration on Friday, December 21, 2001

Children and young people will again noisily roam the streets. The following rules are to be applied:

- The festival activities are not to be started before 5 AM.
- Igniting of fireworks is prohibited.
- Don't put your garbage out before 7 AM.
- Make sure your bicycle is in the garage.
- Lock your house and garden gates.
- Parents are, besides taking care of their children and young people, also responsible for damage after law ZG 13333.

The non-acquainted might ask: Is there a tornado expected or perhaps a terror attack or war? Already two weeks before the countdown, quite frustrated and ready to throw myself together with my first graders into the tohuwabohu, the Madonna with the protective cape appears to me. Smiling mildly in her blue cloak sprinkled with thousands of stars, she enwraps countless figures, only their heads visible. Her protégés look with satisfaction, calmly but also somewhat curiously, out into the world. The Madonna doesn't stand still, no, she continues to move on. I go with her. Where is she going to lead me? But yes, of course, to the stable! The ox warms the baby's feet with its breath. The donkey nudges the ox closer to the newborn. The mouse brings a golden kernel of wheat. The spider weaves a net out of the rays of light. The dog jumps around the cradle and barks joyously. I have it – we have to go again to see Arco. Last year he was the sweetheart of all the third graders on the farm. A date is set quickly: “You can come at 3 AM.” “Well that is a little too early. Would 9 AM be all right?” My sweet little ones are not enthused at all. They want to go to disco!

During a pause I have a problem. Now, one day before, I don't know how to protect my little ones. During the intermission I spot the girls from

the sixth grade with a stuffed cat. “What do you have there?” “This is Felix for the French lesson.” “Oh, I need him. Would you lend him to me for an hour?” “All right, but we want him back!”

Felix lies flat on the classroom floor. “What is the matter with Busi (the cat)?” the children ask. “Well, you know, this is Felix; he is French. *Il est triste. Il a une probleme.*” “What is his problem?” The children gather around Felix; they are full of sympathy. “Felix wants to visit his best friend. His name is Arco. He is an old shepherd dog. He lives on the farm. Felix hasn’t seen him for a long time.” “Well, let him go.” “He is not allowed to.” “Let him go. We will all go with him.” And the mouse, also a stuffed one, goes with us, too. All of us run to the sixth grade teacher. She doesn’t understand, but the main thing is we are allowed to keep Felix until tomorrow. He is put to bed, together with the mouse so that they both can have a good night’s sleep.

Next morning tired and worn out, as if pulled out of the water and hungry, the little ones tumble to school. They immediately spot Felix and the mouse peeking out of the knapsack. It is snowing and cold. On the way to the farm there is a lot to see: windows sprayed with shaving soap, cars enwrapped in toilet paper, blackened teeth of the beauties on the billboards, dumped-out waste-paper baskets, trampled bicycles; in the bus afterwards the free newspaper issues with the burning towers – a review of the year already now? I collect all the flyers. “When you can read, you can have them.” And I hear disappointment from children and adults.

We arrive. Felix and the mouse are allowed out of the backpack. “Where is Arco?” “Arco was old; he died last year,” the farmer states. Felix is sad; all the children want to console him. Now all we need is breakfast. We unpack the backpack to find bread, cheese, nuts, and mandarins. Finally, off to the animals. Scared by the loud noise of the children, the calves hide themselves in the outermost corner of the corral. Serkan lures them with his self-composed recitative chant: “Dear animals, come to me.” All the children chime in. The animals allow themselves to be petted.

We light a candle in the horse stable, sing, and dance. For a moment there appears to be a Christmas mood. It is so cold that we can see the steam of our breath. The head of a horse nosily peeks through a moveable window. Each child is allowed to distribute hay with a flat hand. Most of them are scared by the large teeth of the horse but are surprised how soft his nostrils feel and how the horse likes to be petted. As they do it they feel the warm breath of the animal. The food for the cows is already there; the children are very busy. “None of them has a telephone wire to God; they don’t have any horns,” a boy from Kosovo calls out indignantly.

The bull fascinates everybody. They want to goad him, but nothing disturbs his equanimity. So they just put his feed in front of him. There is big excitement with the pigs at the outside corral. All animals want to greet the children. My Muslims pinch their noses but give up their antipathy soon and find the animals quite adorable. Mehmet says: “At home I will go under the

shower and soap my whole body.” “Why that?” “Because of the pigs.” Mehmet is a Turk.

On the way home the children assess the animals: cows, a horse, many pigs, and Zorro. “Do you mean Toro (the bull)?” “No, no, Zorro.” “What does he look like?” “He has a black mask.” “How many legs?” “Two.” “Is he a human being or an animal?” “An animal.” I am surprised. Well, maybe they are right.

As we part, some of the children ask if there will be school in the afternoon. “No, we are on vacation.” They depart somewhat disappointed. “This is not a vacation. This is God’s punishment,” I say outloud to my colleague, and then we laugh. The worst day of the year has been mastered!

The next day there is a headline in the paper: “An explosive night!” The newest hit was to blow up parking meters. The police received eighty complaints. Trash containers were set on fire and put into the streets. At a bus stop the glass windows had been smashed and bicycles had been put on fire. There was considerable damage. The principal of the school district writes: “Are you surprised that many people call the year’s end celebration the high point of the outgoing year?”

Draw Me and Angel

Everybody knows Paul (the name is a pseudonym). He is eight years old. The children at the school grounds are afraid of him: “Tomorrow you will bring me twenty dollars. If you don’t, I will hit you.” Paul is strong. The woman at the newspaper stand wonders, the only food he buys is Coca-Cola and ice cream. This is his breakfast. He always pays with paper money. The father informs the teacher: This is my only son and heir. He has to become somebody. The seven sisters are not mentioned.

The mother takes care of the ten family members. What she cooks for lunch usually is not appreciated by Paul. He prefers to eat in a restaurant. The seven sisters adore him; they spoil him and serve him. The school dentist can not handle him. Paul does not open his mouth. He is afraid. “When all his teeth are rotten and he is in much pain, send him to me as an emergency case. Then we will extract all his teeth under anesthesia.” The teacher thinks she doesn’t hear right. She has more or less of a relationship with him. Paul is his own master – working material and homework do not exist for him.

On the last day before vacation the boy comes to school pale-faced and troubled. “A dead man is in front of our door; the police are in our apartment. My father is on the phone all the time. Draw me a protective Angel!” “There is a sheet for you – why don’t you draw your Angel yourself!” He is finished in a moment. My God! This Angel needs salvation – it is a bodyguard with broken wings!

In the following months Paul works overtime; he is embroidering his Angel. There is a dialogue between the boy and the Angel. The teacher is allowed to provide some help for him in his work. The Angel becomes ever lighter and less heavy. He becomes a flower Angel, hovering between heaven

and earth. He has eyes of light on his wings. His heart is a shining cross. Paul keeps on embroidering at home. None of his sisters is allowed to touch his work.

Two years pass and Paul is in a different class. His Angel is displayed in a major exhibit. Paul walks all alone through the big city; he wants to see his Angel. He is proud of him. The day after the exhibit he is the first to retrieve his Angel. He needs him.

At Easter, 2003, Samuel calls me: "I was in your class ten years ago." "But I never had a Samuel in my class. Who are you?" "I am Paul. I changed my first and last names. I am now called Samuel Kuster." Well, that is some news! "I am here with my wife and am looking for the Catholic church. We want to see the Angel exhibit there and I want to show my wife my Angel." After I give him directions to get there, he gives me his address and we agree to meet. I am thoughtful through the whole evening: Paul-Samuel – one who follows his Angel!

(At this moment I have seventeen Angels in the St. Francis Church of Zurich – an exhibit the Catholic priest has asked to display from Easter until Pentecost. I am very happy about it!)

You ask too much

The first encounter: "Hello. This is Henry. I am his mother. I will be back at 6 PM. Bye-bye!"

Before I could scratch together my miserable school English – I ask myself: Why did I not pay better attention at school – the black woman has disappeared. Henry remains. Say, that does not work! School already started ten minutes ago. We are in the middle of our morning song. The week starts well! The children are interested. "No, Henry is not made out of chocolate. Leave this. Don't lick."

The boy rolls his eyes until the whites show . . . all the chairs are too small for him, as well as the tables. Maybe he does not even belong in first grade? Maybe he is a third grader? Surely! Finally, at noon, a good soul at the daycare feels compassionate: "But only today, for lunch." "And then?" "This is not my affair! Call the daycare coordinator." I am free until evening.

In the teacher's lounge I find a note in my box: "Henry, eight years old, from Ghana." However, today I had not picked up my mail! Finally, between 5 and 6 PM the mother appears. "This is the telephone number of the daycare. Bye-bye."

Next morning I have the paper work. Henry is asthmatic. "Do you need an inhaler?" "Yes." "Please bring it." After Henry survives an attack without the inhaler, he brings it. Daily occurrences. Daily!

Henry got a place in the daycare. The road to get there is far. There are many opportunities to tarry, for instance at the newspaper stand. I get acquainted with his father. We have a teacher-parent conversation. The mother is the same person, but the father? I don't know. Are my eyes that bad? "You are not the same person. What is your name?" This scenario is repeated.

Each time a different man is the father! Upon my request to make a drawing of the family, I get different pictures. The number of family members changes from five to nine!

My home visit: after he has been missing for a few days, I ring the bell at Henry's house. I shouldn't have done this! A huge man opens the door: "What do you want?" "I am Henry's teacher." "Come in, sit down!" The giant of a man stands there in front of me; the room is filled with people. Everyone speaks at once. I don't understand a word. Henry is fetched and confirms that I am his teacher. The girl with the baby is his sister; no, she does not go to school. She is twelve years old – one of those "hidden children." The situation becomes critical when I ask for Henry's parents. "You ask too much!" I am put outside with threatening gestures.

I look into Henry's school bag. In the parent's notebook I find a scrap of paper with the following account:

I gave him:

April	1,000.00	
June	500.00	
Sept.	2,000.00	etc.

You ask too much. It is better not to know. Father and mother are jobless.

The story of the White Princess fascinates Henry. The seven-headed dragon wants to marry her. Because she refuses him she is captured in the dark tower and is forced to go without water and bread. But the white dove brings bread and wine; the sun brings light and warmth; the roses protect her from evil. Henry makes a drawing of the picture and wants to embroider it. I advise that it is much too complicated, but he works at it for an entire year. In spite of great difficulties the task is accomplished.

"Where do you go for the holidays?" the children ask each other. Henry is going to Istanbul, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt – and all this in two weeks! After this trip, his jacket has little cuts in the lining. He remembers only small white bags inside. Now he gets a new jacket. At the next vacation time it is the same story. The school doctor is notified. She wants to report the information, but somehow nothing happens – everything gets stuck. At school Henry's head rests often on the table. He sleeps. I ask at the pharmacy what kind of medication he gets. He has two prescriptions for cough syrup from two different doctors. Henry drinks the syrup from the bottle. Codeine makes you sleepy.

Years have gone by and Henry is with a different teacher. Sometimes he visits me. His older sister went to school after all. She is now a cashier at a department store. The last father remained the same. Henry got a little brother and sister. I think of him often.

The way out of darkness into the light

"I'm having a baby, I'm having a baby – at Christmas time!" Armin hops about the room singing. He is nine years old and since summer has

been in the third grade with a new teacher in another school building. But he declared Thursday afternoon as a visiting day. Now he is with us and sits in his old place. That is how it is.

We met each other in spring a year and a half ago in a streetcar. You said, "I know you." I did not understand you, for how can someone without teeth be understood? Your father, irritated a little, explained to me: he said, "You are a teacher; I want him to be in school with you." In the summer I received the new first and second graders. You were the last one. You came up to me and clung, beaming, around my neck. Your mother smiled in embarrassment. I had an uncertain feeling: will we make it? But you have chosen me. Now I have you literally around my neck.

I was to visit the parents and bit-by-bit I learned a few facts. I must never ask questions. And yet, over time trust grows and friendship develops. Piece-by-piece painful experiences come to light. This family is Bosnian-Muslim. The father was an officer in the Bosnian army, consisting of Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, and Croats. For months he was interned in the Srebrenica concentration camp. During this time the mother had hidden her two year-old from the Serbs in a clothes closet.

When the boy came into the first grade, he needed help to walk. He had a fear of stairs bordering on panic. He had no teeth; he couldn't talk. He rejected all contact; if someone approached him, he screamed. A lot of devoted work was needed. I wanted to help this child. I reminded myself of the life of Kaspar Hauser.

Situations like this are not always easy for classmates. His classmate, Paul, complains: "Yesterday he painted the fire red; the day before he ran down the stairs; and today" – Paul's voice trembles indignantly and his eyes shine white in his black face– "today he screamed and wanted to beat me up!" "Leave him be; this is quite normal," I cautioned. That was not what Paul wanted to hear. He turned around and stomped away. Why doesn't his teacher understand anything?

Tomorrow he will turn up at the football field and try to play football. Then, one day, he will be the first to know the result of his figuring; and he will be correct. With his self-styled jumping rope he will *seiligumpe* in the spring like all the others. What in the world is happening?

I decided not to tell the other children his history, otherwise he would be labeled a "special case." By allowing normal development patterns he will have a chance to become a normal rascal and it is good that way. Basta!

As time moves along his steps of progress no longer elicit resentment or astonishment, but rather call forth joy and encouragement. The children wait expectantly to see what he will conquer next.

With gratitude I look back at the progress with this child. When his incisors appeared there was a celebration– I knew that we would make it. Parents, teachers, and classmates were allowed to help with this "second birth"; healthy walking, healthy talking, healthy thinking finally became possible. This is a true victory of the Light over the darkness!

Photography time – or, who is the culprit?

There is a terrible noise in front of the classroom. I go to open the door. I face an excited group of rowdies. They all talk at the same time, not one of them speaks German. One boy pushes forward: “He is there; let him come in; then, we’ll steal the bike.” They come dangerously close. I hear: “Bicycle stolen, stomped on.” A cold terror seizes me. Then I grab for the sword of light. I am the commander– these are my troops. With a big gesture I point in the direction of the stairs. “I don’t need you.” The miracle happens – they leave. None of them looks back. I turn the key inside the classroom with the speed of lightning. Thank you, God, for that presence of mind! I take a deep breath. The sight that presents itself to me is overwhelming. “Photo time” passes through my thoughts. Everybody sits quietly and stares ahead of them. It was never quieter! Don’t I have wonderful children? I will give the photographer I just became acquainted with a valuable hint, come and see me at school! You can spare yourself a journey around the world. She wants to sponsor an exhibition of children’s photos.

But what I hear from these beautiful children is simply criminal! For a long time they “find” (i.e., steal) bicycles, take them apart, sell, trade or give away parts and smash the remains with their feet. They all know about it, but nobody admits to being present. Manuel is supposed to be their leader. He sits in his chair, arms crossed, and looks around unbelievably. I think, “What? Manuel? The little Portuguese with Pampers in his pocket? That cannot be true.” “Manuel, is this true?” A barely audible, lovely little voice answers, “We just wanted to play.”

My final word is short but clear: “You will never do this again. Otherwise I will let the mean boys in and they will beat you all up.” After this we paint the Angel Michael. They all know him, especially the dragon. The paintings turn into radiant, strong pictures. I never again heard anything about stolen bicycles.

The day the dog got out

Today the dog got out. He is wicked. He flies across the sky and spits fire. He has torn his leash.

Kelmend tells me this story with wide open eyes before class begins. There is nothing to be done, he wants to embroider it. I am not enthused. Summer vacation starts in two days, everything is complete and in order, all children are assigned to their future classes – and now this challenge!

“That will not work. Your embroidered picture is finished – it is a lighthouse, cottage, meadow, the ocean, clouds, birds and the rainbow. It is all there. There is no more room.” “Then take away the light from the lighthouse.” Kelmend slowly becomes impatient. I give in; time is pressing, but sometimes there are more important things than arithmetic and reading. I assign the work for the remaining class, take the scissors and remove a cloud, flying birds and the light of the lighthouse, according to Kelmend’s directions. Now a space as big as a hand is available. “That’s how big your dog is allowed to

be.” Five minutes later the dog is there, a dangerous beast! Kelmend copies the picture onto jute and, before I am aware of it, he is already embroidering.

“Today I will stay all day and also tomorrow, until he is finished. The dog eats the pirates that want to steal the sheep and who had sunk gold into the ocean. He does not attack the rescue boat; the life belt dangles on the mast.”

This last week Kelmend’s mother came to see me and told me the following: “We received a deportation order; in a month we will go to Kosovo. I have four children. Kelmend is eight years old and is the eldest. You know, I want to protect my children. I am divorced. My husband is marrying a woman from the ‘red light’ district. The divorce will cost \$4,000. He is a bad man!” I don’t think this is true. “I am going to marry an old man who is in a wheelchair. You know, I want to help my children. We will move in with him. This is my new address.” “How old are you?” “Twenty-four.” She is fighting back the tears. Her voice gets louder and angrier: “He is fifty-six.”

“Does Kelmend know all this?” “No, not yet. He doesn’t know him yet.” This woman is strong. I never would have been able to do this at the age of twenty-four! “I hope everything goes well for you.” “Certainly the lawyer is expensive.” There is nothing more to say. I feel helpless and sick. “When will you tell him?”

The dog is out. Kelmend knows everything. I admire you, woman; you are courageous. Thank you for your trust. I admire you, child; your creative imagination will help you.

Half a year has gone by and I am trying to reach Kelmend. The telephone service has been cut off.

The World Trade Center in our classroom

This morning the little hands of the first graders at the door to the classroom hold the newspaper toward me. No greeting, no look, only this: “Look there!” Their faces are of old men and women, but a spark of expectancy flashes. Unlocking the door I curse to myself— how many times must we experience the brutality of the whole television culture. “All right, go in.” I have to go through it; there is no way around it.

My single Christian child runs around the room and yells: “Bandits, bandits, bandits!” “Light a candle so you can have light.” Contraction and expansion— a candle burns.

The children tell about the destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York City. Each one has seen pictures on the television of the horror, far into the previous night. “Like in Kosovo. That is war.” They don’t let themselves be driven from the abyss— two of them paint the city. The airplanes fly past; the people laugh; the children play; the dogs bark— a peaceful world. In this busy silence someone calls: “Hey, we are painting an an Angel” Everyone looks at Ali. He is the first grader. “Yes,” they all call, “But where?” “Children, the pictures are finished. It is five to twelve.” “Can’t you see we aren’t finished?” That was for me. “All right then, it is too late now. But I

promise you can do them tomorrow.” Ali is not to be stopped. “There, between the towers, there is room for it.” He paints the Angel, a tree and beneath it a baby. “The Angel watches the baby, that nothing falls on it.”

In the evening, as I review the day, I stop at the tree. Why is it between the towers? Then I understand – Ali’s father, cutting trees, was killed by a falling tree. For three days and nights Ali and his brothers held the wake; then all three buried their father. Ali was only three years old at the time.

The next morning there are an additional six pupils at the door – their teacher is sick. My little ones remind me of my promise: “Now we will paint the Angel.” Unbelievable amazement spreads over the faces of the six new children. Is the teacher crazy or what is wrong here? Hesitation and uncertainty on my part. “I did not promise you. You may do it or not. Every Angel is correct – you cannot go wrong with it!” “Let’s do it.”

After recess we build the World Trade Center with large building blocks. The proud builders pose before it for a photo. “We’re building a new city. It will be a most beautiful one.”

Paul Hindemith: *Children’s Cantata*

Child

Tonight my telephone will remain plugged in. You wish to call me, from the bus, with your own cell phone. It is going to be a long journey to Kosovo; take along warm clothing. It is cold there! “Yes, I know, there is snow on the ground. My father will get warm clothing today for all of us. The baby will go with us too.” Child!

Today you called me three times. You were excited and told me all your worries. “Another child has beaten me up. Now– how do you say it – I have a hurt on my head.” “Are you bleeding?” “Not anymore. Can I come to your class? My teacher is a mean one...”

That’s how the conversation went. In between, you were crying. I tried to calm you. We talked for a whole hour. When your father sees the telephone bill there will be an outburst! You were, however, not to be stopped. At the same time I got a lecture from you on modern telephone conversation. At first there was a cordless telephone; then in the street with a deafening traffic background noise and then a quiet, normal plug-in telephone. Then suddenly: “Bye, bye. Mother just came in. I have to cook spaghetti and take care of the baby.” End...a humming sound...Child!

I fear for you. You are temperamental. You see a lot. You hear a lot. You talk a lot. You naïvely speak the truth. The truth can be deadly– especially during a war. There was war in Kosovo; there will be more war in Kosovo; there is winter in between. The UCK soldiers need weapons in spring. Weapons cost money– lots of money. Hopefully the Serbs won’t rob you! What do they do with children who have money– lots of money? Our boss received hundreds of vacation applications this Christmas. There had never been that many– most of them from Kosovo families. All have been approved. Child!

You painted me your Angel. She is beautiful. About her you say: “She laughs in heaven. She has received many stars on her dress from God. She does not have any on her arm— she did not always do everything right. I say to her: “Do everything right this time. It is important.” This child is nine years old. Her whole life is ahead of her.

What does a thousand dollar bill look like?

What does a thousand dollar bill look like? I don’t know. The lady at the post office window doesn’t know either. The clerk at the bank has to think about it. Aren’t there two heads on that bill? I haven’t had one in my hands for quite awhile. But, Manuel knows it: a one, a zero, another zero and another one. Right. And what else? I think: “Max and Moritz”— two well-known comic characters from German literature. Maybe! This story tells how this bill came into the hands of this child and into his sight.

It is a wonderful spring afternoon in the teacher’s lounge. It is break. Just one more hour today, then— outside! One has to take advantage of the sun after the long, dark winter. Someone knocks at the door. The baker woman from around the corner and a man enter. “Who here is in charge of the little ones— first and second grade?” “Yes, that’s me. How can I help you?” The man approaches me. “May I take a look into your classroom?” “What has happened?” We go to the door. The baker woman tells me, “This morning a little boy came in and wanted to buy a chocolate Easter egg with a thousand dollar bill.” “How good that your wife acted spontaneously!” I say to the man. Then the strange man shows me his identification card— police. Oh, my!

A glance into the classroom suffices. “This one,” says the baker woman. “I know you, you have often been with us,” says the police officer. “May I take him along?” The three of them walk out. Next morning I take the boy aside: “Well, Manuel, how did it go?” “I found this scrap of paper on the kitchen floor. You know, when my uncle from Portugal comes, these paper scraps sometimes fall out of his pockets. He is a police officer, you know.” What a story. “And the policeman yesterday, was he nice towards you?” “Well, you know, I have been there often—we know each other.”

My world is turned upside-down. In the first grade we learn about a one with one zero, meaning ten. Should we get to three zeros after all? In the summer his family surprisingly returns to their homeland.

Prenatal diagnosis

Summer

Excited, Asije shows me a photo: “This is my brother Ali.” “Where?” I cannot recognize anything.” “But yes, Mami is going to have a baby. That’s it.” “And if it is going to be a girl?” “No, the doctor has said it will be a boy.” Asije shows the photo proudly to the other children. I am irritated: somehow I don’t like the story.

A few days later Asije's father is on the phone: "I will have a son. Then we won't need Asije anymore. Next Saturday she will fly to Turkey. There she will go to first grade. Her grandparents feel so lonely." "Listen, that won't work. Come see me at school. We need to talk about it. Asije feels so much at home here." "You don't have to tell me anything; I am her father." "Just don't bring her back. I will not allow her to return to the class." Period. Done.

I feel angry and helpless and I write a memorandum to my supervisor. As I do this, I read in the accompanying papers: schooling last year in Turkey did not work because the child was constantly crying and wanted to be with her parents. After seven weeks her father brought the child back.

In the final days before her departure Asije is devastated. She says goodbye to her classmates. She will fly alone to Turkey, abandoned.

Autumn

Today it is foggy. The dark season begins. It is difficult for the children from the southern countries. There is no sun, no warmth, no playing outside. I tell them the story about St. Nicholas. Suddenly, there is a knock at the door. All yell: "That's him, St. Nicholas!" But it is a much greater surprise: Asije and her father stand there. Her arm is in a cast. She walks over to her still empty seat as a matter of course. The children accept it as quite normal. Asije is beaming.

Her father is afraid— there is sweat on his forehead. He probably remembers my threatening remark from the past— I remember it too! "Asije was in a car accident with her grandparents...no one else was hurt. She has to go to the doctor here." "And then?" He shrugs.

Asije's St. Nicholas picture is the most beautiful one. "Come donkey," says Nicholas, "We will go to the children." "This picture will not enter my house: St. Nicholas is a Christian and we are Muslims," says her father. Asije is in pain. She has to go often to the doctor and the physical therapist. The formerly happy child has turned into a heap of misery. She clings to me.

Her achievements are poor. Of course... she has missed so much. Poor child!

Spring

It took Asije half a year to become stabilized again. She never lived with her grandparents, but stayed with strangers. There was never a car accident either. All this I learn, bit-by-bit, from the child. She is not able to tell me what really happened.

When her father wanted to forbid her from taking swimming lessons for religious reasons, I sent him home. "Ask Allah if he will rescue your child when she falls into the water and is unable to swim. Tell me tomorrow Allah's answer." Next day he simply stands there: "Allah will rescue her only when she knows how to swim." "See, Allah is good." Many family members go on a pilgrim's voyage to Mecca. Meanwhile an aunt takes care of all the

children. Afterwards, the father forbids the child to sing at school. Meanwhile I have been reading the Koran. I am fighting for the rights of his child. Asije will stay here anyway. Why? The parents need a nanny for Ali.

Mejreme

You have written so many letters to me since you began with a new teacher in the second grade. “I love you. Do you love me too? May I visit you? Here is my telephone number. Call me.” “Yes, my little dove, I will write to you. Your last letter contained three things: a postcard of an old, arched bridge, a drawing of both of us, and your photo entitled: “When I was still little.”

Mejreme, your hand is red and filled with blisters. “Who has done this? What is his name?” You shake your head ... you don’t know him. The next day you say: “I will never tell you.” At first you lied. Your hand was supposedly squeezed in the door. I didn’t believe you. This injury was caused by fire. Go and put your hand under flowing water. I run to the elevator crying: “Who has done such a thing?” I leave the class in the care of a colleague. We run to the doctor. We both need Bach’s Rescue Remedy®. You ask: “Do you hurt, too?” “Yes, yes!” The tears are running down my face.

Finally at the doctor’s— this is an emergency case. He is an old, experienced doctor who has seen a lot. I see shock in his eyes: “Second degree burns. What happened?” No answer. “Here is a prescription for painkiller. Get it from the pharmacy and give it to the child. Send me her father.”

We run to the pharmacy. On the way the pain increases and the shock gives way. “A boy wanted to sleep with me.” “What did you say?” “I didn’t want to. So he held my hand in boiling milk.” “Where was your mother?” “She was there too.” Where is the Rescue Remedy®? The bottle is empty. I do something forbidden in front of the pharmacist: “Take this tablet and drink this water.”

Next day you are here again. “You were supposed to stay at home.” “No, no, I am need to learn.” “Who has done this?” “I myself.” Now this is a lie. She is right handed. It is the left hand that has been burned. No more questions. I fail miserably on the telephone: “You want to report it?” “Do not do it; we still need you. Think of the story of the ‘Brandkugelschreiber’ ... three people were scorched. That was her brother. He is in the juvenile detention center.” (The Brandkugelschreiber looks like a normal pen but spurts flames.)

I send a short report to my supervisor and have difficulty speaking the whole following week. What is there to say? My last try to bring light to this dark story is to confront the father. He talks calmly on his cell-phone in Albanian. I understand. We say goodbye to each other. Mejreme, my little white dove, your hand is healed. I love you.

Air – laundry – machinery – representative

That is what is printed on the small business card he hands me, plus: “United Arabian Emirate” and “Ali” something— I cannot read the name,

and there is also a colored emblem. I ask myself: is this is the symbol of the air-laundry company or of the country?

This short, overly trim, dark-skinned gentleman with the shiny portfolio, polished shoes, tie and pin-striped suit represents himself as Ali. He looks like a bank clerk who has already in the morning taken a dose of “crack” and is drinking Red Bull® every hour. What does he want here?

We just finished our swimming lesson with the first graders. I turn around to adjust the hair dryer so it will not burn the hair of my wet little bunnies. Then I have to take care of missing shoes, golden necklaces, rings, and glasses. He still stands there before me. How did he get into the pool area anyway? Air-Laundry-Machinery– can one wash air?

I am determined to face him: “No interest.” He cannot be dismissed. He begins to explain that he is now responsible for Martin. He is a friend of Martin’s mother. She is abroad for a certain time to sell houses. I call Martin: “Come here, will you?” He comes, naked and crying. “What is the matter? Where is your underwear?” The other children explain: “He had forgotten his swimsuit and went into the water in his underwear.” “Oh, I see, wait a second.” I grab my swim bag and a dry pair of underwear is soon found. “Now Martin, do you know this gentleman?” The child stares at the floor. The child has been with us for a week and has never yet spoken. I am not quite sure if he understands or is simply shy or perhaps something else might be wrong. This morning I met Viviane at the bus station. She had taken care of Martin last week and informed me that she will now go to the University of Muenster. She did not know who was to take care of Martin now. Is it now going to be this polished Arab? “Martin, get dressed; we will wait for you.”

This man called Ali wants information on Martin’s achievements. He gripes about the mother. He wants to see the curriculum. He hands me his business card. Martin goes with him suddenly but willingly, holding his hand. Was this a clever abduction and will I have to face a judge at some point, or is his life now destined?

I call Martin that evening. Thank God, he is on the phone. Mami and Ali are not there. Now she is selling houses; a week ago she sold gold. On the first day of school she had the appearance of a model, running through the school building, screaming and yelling, dragging a reluctant little boy behind her like a sack of potatoes. Was it Spanish or Portuguese that she spoke? She pushed the classroom door open and tossed the boy inside. A torrent of screaming showered down upon me– luckily I did not understand a word. Then, haughtily, she departed.

An act of revenge?

“Look here!” My first graders point excitedly to the floor. There is a puddle under Seinard’s seat. Is this urine? Some children laugh. I distract them. “It’s okay, we will clean up later.” Seinard sits motionless on his chair. He does not understand the commotion. His eyes are listless; he looks ill.

During the break we both clean up. It really is urine. I take the child to the side. “Are you okay? What happened? Are you ill?” The break is short

and so is our conversation. “Yesterday I was at the playground. In the toilet, two men grabbed me and gave me a shot in the arm.” Seinard had said nothing about this at home. He looks ill.

I want to file a report against an unknown person. I call six police stations. All of them rebuke me: “Are you the mother? Were you present? Can you prove it? This is not under our jurisdiction. The person responsible is on vacation.” Everywhere I was shaken off. With the seventh call I got hold of a female police officer. She took note of everything and promised to pursue the affair.

A week later she calls me. She had been to the playground. She saw the parents of the child. This is how the story sounds now: Seinard and a friend found a syringe, filled it with water and he injected it into himself. The father comes to school and provides me with this version. I know this pattern well – it is always the child who has to take the blame. Privately I hear that his father had a terrible argument with his co-residents who left for Kosovo that very night. I noticed a long time ago that his father spends a week every month in Kosovo and then comes back with the “flu.” It does not matter. I inform my supervisor. “Don’t be hysterical. The HIV virus is only active in the air for two hours. Any contamination is not very probable.” Nevertheless, I report to the school doctor and ask him for an AIDS test. Three times I have asked both the father and son to come for an appointment. Three times they did not appear... the story sinks into oblivion. The family moves on. I lose track of them, but the child lingers in my mind.

The birth of the rejoicing Child of light

The first words: “I am handicapped. I can’t learn!” Today is the first day of school. Before me stands a fast-growing first grader. She speaks perfect German. Her voice sounds sharp and cold ... my soul revolts. These two sentences should not stand together.

In the following days the clear, direct task that this child has given me takes form in me as an act of will: I will; I must; I can prove that these two statements are wrong. I simply don’t believe them. A bitter clash of spirits unfolds between me and the demon. He has clutched the heart of this child. Right from the beginning he wants to stifle all development. Light, yes...light is needed. Not the cold, sharp, judging light of the head, but enlivening, warming sunlight from the heart. Yes, child, you are truly handicapped, but not in the way you think. The barely perceptible cerebral palsy that– as her mother tells me– happened at birth and shows itself in weakness of coordination and in the grasping of forms is to be overcome by consistent work.

Again and again her devastated look strikes me. And again the hard, judging voice enters the group like a sword. And then her laughing when something goes wrong. The look, the voice, the laugh– these three must be transformed. It is a long, arduous path.

Here and there are seeds, sprouts, little plants to be discovered– these need to be strengthened. A vacation in the Lower Alps at the farm pleases

her. She draws a picture for me – deer in the forest. “I want to embroider that.” From day to day the picture takes on life. Earth, meadow, flowers, stones, a small lake, fir trees, a little bird, butterflies, a fox and a buck, puffy clouds. And then everywhere, sunlight, sun warmth. The last portion of cloth is filled with it. The being of the child brightens; self-confidence grows.

In the second year she wishes to embroider a Madonna. The mother sits on the dark earth, protected by roses. In the middle, at the very end, the jubilant light-child comes into being. Yes, I am here; I am born. In the heart. The roses on the circumference are jubilant too.

Her current teacher reports: Sarah is a cheerful, bright girl. She is one of my best pupils. I am happy to have her in my class.

The Poor Child

“Where should the poor child sit?” A round woman with a round child stands in the doorway and looks gloomy – without knocking, without greeting. From the transfer papers I already have reviewed the essential information: Andi is a first grader, better to be schooled in a small class. “The poor child can sit wherever he wishes; every seat is available.” “But that, of course, is not possible.” “What do you mean?” “We had to take the bus. I’m not going for that.” Meanwhile the poor child has found a seat in the front. The class returns from break. The mother asks, “Do you like it here or do you want to go with me immediately?” Before the poor child can open his mouth I say: “The poor child will stay here. He is fine. You can pick him up at noon.”

The poor child feels better every day. But I feel worse; a little “know-it-all” has popped into our class. But first, let’s get acquainted with the story—it gets even wilder. “My cat has spots; yours is wrong. There are no red cats. I don’t feel like doing this now. You do it. I will not go out during break; it is too cold.” My colleague laughs: “Ever heard about tyrannical children? Read Irina Prekop.” After reading her observations I see everything more clearly. I don’t have to wait long for my performance—after the next nagging I thunder: “I am the boss here. You will go out of this door and not enter it again unless you stop this.” “Yes, yes,” he replies— a barely audible little voice; two shocked eyes; a deadly silent classroom. Well, the first hurdle has been jumped. But with the mother it will take some firmness.

“Now, we just came from Italy ... so that the poor child will get a German education; but you have mainly foreigners in your class. For ten months he was in my tummy. The doctor has said that he will always need much extra love ... and you suggest the after-school-care; he will be unable to play there.” The poor child begins to enjoy his new freedom. He does not have to puff himself up like a frog. He likes the aftercare. He even speaks some Italian. But it’s slow “letting go,” a painful process for his mother.

Andi draws a strong bison with its calf. The little one confronts the mighty father-mother with confidence. It has room for growing. Andi has earned himself a slice of freedom.

Christophorus is a might giant. He has to be painted in four parts. Who will help paint him? Mario, the Italian boy, paints the head and the Christ

child. Andi, the German, paints the heart. Carlo, from Peru, paints the legs and Isuf, from Kosovo, the feet. Together we create the new world. There are no foreigners anymore.

A human being is a human being

“Get up! Immediately! You are a human being, not a dog and not a doormat.” I yell at the boy. He lies in front of the door to the school building. The instreaming children do not notice him. They stumble over him, push forward, step on him. The boy does not move. I pull him up by his arms; thank God he is not injured. “What does this mean? What is the matter with you? Is this supposed to be a joke? Now go on into the classroom.”

I recall this scene in the Children’s Hospital. Spring vacation began an hour ago. I am sitting at Slavko’s bedside; Mehmet sits across from me. I just got acquainted with him five minutes ago. I had asked his teacher to bring him here; assailant and victim should both be confronted. This is no easy task I took upon myself. Neither of the two wishes to talk— let’s leave it at this.

Earlier this morning the police had called: “We have one of the two culprits; he is named Mehmet. He is a Turk and is in the fifth grade with Mr. Meier.”

Mr. Meier has remained outside. I am inside. The teddy bear I brought along lodges in Slavko’s healthy arm. The one that had been trampled on is in a sling. Last night they had put a steel brace on his elbow. Slavko is in pain. Between us lies a big picture book. I tell the story of the shepherd with a thousand sheep. He had lost one and is looking for it. When we get to the part of the story when he found it, the eyes of the two boys begin to shine again. Mehmet reaches out to Slavko’s hand: “I’m sorry! It’s okay.”

Then Slavko’s father stands in the open doorway. With one glance he grasps the situation and looks at me unbelievably. He approaches Mehmet with challenging gestures; I have to gather up all my authority and turn to him: “You leave now, immediately. We are not finished yet. I will come get you.” That works! “Mehmet, I will go now and have a talk with your father and Mr. Meier. See to it that you disappear; wait for Mr. Meier downstairs at the entrance.” When I look into Mehmet’s face, I know that everything will be all right.

At the sport festivities a child with a dangling arm runs with the others— not allowed and not registered. Slavko will be one of the first! The new school year has begun. For two weeks Slavko comes to school either too early or too late or not at all. I call his mother: “I don’t know anything. He does not sleep at home.” “He does not? He is a first grader.” “Slavko, where do you sleep?” An embarrassed smile. “I want to know it, today I will go with you.” It is a big city and is frenetic at five o’clock rush hour. I feel as though I am in a mystery movie. There are only red lights— Linden Place, City Hall Square, Weiherhof Place. Slavko moves as agile as a weasel through both driving and stopped cars. He wants to get rid of me . . . from the bus into

a streetcar, then back into the bus – where are we? I lose my orientation. At the Brunnenplatz he is suddenly gone. There – I see the door of a house close. Without conscious selection, I press a button. The door opens, then I see an apartment door– he must have entered this one. I ring the bell. An old man opens the door; Slavko stands behind him. The old man is surprised and reluctant. I point to the child: “This is Slavko; I am his teacher. Who are you?” Luckily he understands some German. I am allowed to enter. The room is tiny – a wide bed, a table, a wash basin, three chairs and a huge TV. I notice a woman sitting silently in the corner, and by and by I get the story: “We are Slavko’s grandparents. His father, our son, is drinking. He often beats up his wife and children. Slavko reports every day after school to his mother; then he joins us.” “You are right, Slavko, I agree.” All three are relieved. They invite me for dinner. The grandfather promises to take Slavko to school every day. He will get a children’s ticket for the streetcar and the bus.

Years later, I become acquainted with his high school teacher at a conference. Slavko now lives at her place and also goes to school there.