

The Origins of the Waldorf Movement

and its Current Challenges

by Henry Barnes

On April 23, 1919, five months after the end of World War I, Rudolf Steiner visited the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. The German nation, defeated in the war, was teetering on the brink of economic, social and political chaos. Steiner spoke to the workers about the need for social renewal, for a new way of organizing society and its political, economic and cultural life.

After the lecture, Steiner, met with Emil Molt - his student, friend and owner of the factory - and with the plant's managers and supervisors. Molt asked Steiner if he would undertake to establish and lead a school for the children of the employees of the company. The others present enthusiastically supported the proposal, and Steiner agreed. He set four conditions, however, each of which went against common practice of the day: 1. that the school be open to all children; 2. that it be co-educational; 3. that it be a unified twelve-year school; and 4. that the teachers, those individuals actually in contact with the children, have primary control of the school, with minimum interference from the state or from economic sources. At that time in Germany (as in most of Europe), schools usually served a particular social class; were segregated by sex; separated out at an early age those few destined for higher education from those headed for vocational training; and were controlled by and served the state. Steiner's conditions were radical for the day, but Molt gladly agreed to them and work began.

There was much to do. A site had to be found and purchased, a building constructed or renovated, then outfitted and equipped. Most im-

portantly, a founding faculty had to be assembled and prepared for its pioneering task. Steiner called together from among the students of his spiritual-scientific work, a group ready to take on the challenge. They came from various professions and walks of life. Many gave up secure positions to start this entirely new venture. From August 21st until September 5th Steiner guided this pioneer group through three fundamental pedagogical courses, lecturing three times each day. He presented a new understanding of the human being, and of child development; a new curriculum; and new methods of instruction. Throughout, Steiner directed the inner attention of his listeners to the spiritual and moral realities behind human existence. On September 7, 1919, the Independent Waldorf School (Die Freie Waldorfschule) opened its doors. Within four months it had, as one historian observed, been "literally stamped out of the ground."

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Steiner hoped that the newly-founded Waldorf School would have a widespread, immediate impact on German education. This did not happen. Nevertheless, before Steiner's death in 1925, similar schools had been founded in Hamburg and in The Hague. And by the time Hitler came to power in

Germany in 1933, there were seven Waldorf schools in Germany, three in Switzerland, and one each in London, Budapest, Oslo and New York. In 1935 the Anthroposophical Society, founded by Rudolf Steiner, was banned in Germany, and by 1941 all the German, Dutch and Hungarian schools had been closed by the Nazis. When the original Waldorf school in Stuttgart was closed in 1938, the state-controlled public press clearly stated that there was no room in Germany for two types of education, one which educated citizens for the state, and one which taught individuals to think for themselves.

The seed of Waldorf education was planted in the soil of North America in October 1928. In a brownstone building - one in a row of brownstones on New York's East 37th Street - twelve children of assorted ages plus five teachers gathered to work. The Rudolf Steiner School of New York was made possible by a handful of individuals who saw in Steiner's teachings the basis of a fundamental renewal of education.

There were two floors of classrooms in that first school building. The sunny rooms in back were used for the arts, those fronting on the street for academics. The classrooms also served as living spaces, so each morning the studio/living spaces were converted into classrooms. In the afternoon when the children left, the rooms reverted to personal use. The school moved twice before settling into its present home in 1944. Meanwhile other Waldorf schools were founded, among the first were the Kimberton Farms School, in Kimberton, Pennsylvania in 1941, and the High Mowing School in Wilton, New Hampshire, in 1942.

Today there are some 530 schools in thirty-two countries working with Rudolf Steiner's ideas on education and serving about 120,000 children. There are 138 schools in Germany alone (13 in what was formerly East Germany), and an estimated 53,000 German schoolchildren - five per cent of the national total- are in Waldorf schools. There are 83 schools in The Netherlands, 32 in Switzerland, 25 in Great Britain, and 77 in the Scandinavian countries. There are schools also in Australia (17), New Zealand (4), South Africa (6) - including multiracial schools - and Brazil (4), Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia and India each have two schools. Peru,



Uruguay, Japan, Israel and Egypt each have one Waldorf school. Besides there are some two hundred kindergartens world-wide that are either independent of an existing school or are part of a pioneer school in the early stages of development. In the Swiss canton of Bern the individual public school teacher has great freedom in the classroom. Waldorf education is officially recognized there and more than one hundred teachers are working according to Waldorf principles.

Since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe there has been an explosion of interest there in Waldorf education. It is seen by many as crucial to the development of democracy in these counties long under totalitarian rule. There are already school initiatives underway in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia and the U.S.S.R. Several teacher training programs are already established as well.

As of January 1992, there are ninety-one schools in the United States, Canada and Mexico. Of these 37 are full members of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America; 13 are sponsored and 41 have federated status. In October 1991 with the inauguration of the Urban Waldorf Program in Milwaukee, a Waldorf school was founded for the

first time within a public school system. (Please see Betty Staley's article on page 8.)

There are today also thirty-three full time institutes around the world training teachers for the Waldorf schools. Of these, four are in the United States and one is in Canada. Many schools offer part time introductory courses and in-service apprenticeships.

Each Waldorf school and institute is an independent entity. It administers itself free of any outside control. Each also is economically self-supporting, though in some European countries the state provides funding for operational and capital expenditures. There are associations of schools in countries where a sufficient number exist. There is also an international circle which meets twice yearly in The Hague and in Stuttgart. This circle works closely with the pedagogical leadership at the Goetheanum, the center of the Anthroposophical movement in Dornach, Switzerland. An international teachers conference is held in Dornach every three years.

With the establishment in Milwaukee of a Waldorf Program within the public school system, the Waldorf movement in North America enters a new phase. New questions and challenges arise:

How can genuine educational freedom exist within a system of political control? How can a way of education grounded in an understanding of the human being as a spiritual being exist within a "value-neutral" educational framework? How can administrative autonomy, so essential to a Waldorf school, be maintained within a bureaucratic system? These and other questions will require not theoretical answers, but practical ones arising from the direct experience and inner activity of the individuals involved. Responses out of insight alone will create the environment of mutual understanding and respect, and of healing necessary for true education. Fortunately, the fostering of just this insight - in the teacher and in the student - lies at the heart of Waldorf education.

In meeting the challenges ahead we must be open to new ways of doing things. What has worked in a Waldorf School in Germany or rural New England, however well based on Waldorf theory,

however familiar and personally satisfying, may not meet the needs of a troubled second grader in inner city Los Angeles or Houston or New York. Nor will it be convincing to his parents, nor to a hard-pressed colleague there with a life and teaching experience much different than our own. And new approaches valid for Milwaukee may not be realistic for Indianapolis, Jacksonville, or Chattanooga. And what works in a certain setting in 1992-93 may not be effective in 1995 or 2000.

This need for insightful and practical solutions to the challenges ahead underlines an urgent problem in the Waldorf movement. It is the lack of trained and experienced teachers, individuals in whom such problem-solving has become second nature. Even if every graduate of the five full-time teacher training centers in North America were immediately to begin teaching in a Waldorf school the need still would not be fully met. In fact, many graduates never become practicing teachers or do so only at a later date. The situation is so critical that many schools now recruit teachers locally and give them in-service training. New schools, however, and schools seeking a replacement for a teacher departing unexpectedly often have a very hard time finding qualified staff.

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This shortage of teachers points to another fundamental problem - lack of adequate financial resources. As independent schools, Waldorf schools in North America must support themselves. Very few have endowments so expenses must be met primarily by tuition. Since parents must in addition through their taxes support the public school system, tuition charges are kept relatively low. Hence most Waldorf schools struggle to meet operational and capital costs. The typical Waldorf teacher salary is below the salaries of public school teachers, modest as these are. Aware of this, prospective teachers just out of college may balk at borrowing to finance their Waldorf teacher training. And mature individuals convinced of the need for fundamental

educational renewal and willing to make a career change in order to take part - often these become the very best Waldorf teachers - may hesitate without the assurance of an income adequate for the support of a family. Besides, new school initiatives, enthusiastic but uninhibited by experience, often fail to establish prior funding for the training of their core of founding teachers. This adds to the strain on the many schools already struggling to make ends meet. The related problems of finance and of teacher recruitment will remain as long as parents can exercise educational choice only after contributing to a tax-supported public school system.

We need not be pessimistic. However, we must take a hard look at the situation of the Waldorf movement as it enters a new phase and as we approach the end of the century. Waldorf education and Rudolf Steiner's work in general have been called "the best kept secret in American life today!" This is rapidly changing. Waldorf education is increasingly well-known. And as intractable problems threaten to overwhelm the nation's educational system more and more people are looking to the Waldorf movement for solutions. This will doubtless increase in the years ahead. All those in the Waldorf movement - teacher, parents, trustees, alumni, and friends will be called on to meet new challenges, to fill new roles.

The times call out for change. Our society has a terrible burden of unmet human, social, and

educational needs. Waldorf education can be a source of healing and transformation - for the individual and for society. It can make a substantial contribution to the renewal of our national life. The expansion of the Association of Waldorf Schools and the inauguration of this journal both are necessary and encouraging signs. Those several dedicated individuals who pioneered this work sixty-three years ago are surely cheering us on as we in the Waldorf movement enter a new phase and prepare to meet new challenges!

Henry Barnes graduated from Harvard College in 1933 and that same year encountered the work of Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf education. Deciding to become a Waldorf teacher, he did the teacher training in Stuttgart.

After several years at The New School in England (now known as Michael Hall), Henry joined the faculty of the Rudolf Steiner School of New York in 1940. He taught there until 1977, for most of that period serving as Chairman of the Faculty. Henry helped found the Rudolf Steiner Educational and Farming Association in Harlemville, New York from which grew the Hawthorne Valley School. From 1974 through 1991 he was General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America. Currently, he is Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America. Henry, who celebrates his 80th birthday in August, has never fully grasped the concept of retirement, and nobody in the Waldorf movement is about to explain it to him.



photo by Sabine Vollmer von Falken