
Waldorf Around the World: South Africa

— Louise deForest

Spring of 2017 was a significant moment for the IASWECE Council to meet in South Africa. The political activist Ahmed Kathrada had just crossed the threshold, leaving South Africa carrying his longstanding question, originally stated in 1994, regarding the end of apartheid: *What have you done with the freedom you have gained?* Kathrada was imprisoned at the same time as Nelson Mandela and is considered a giant in the movement for freedom. His story is told in

the newly published book, *Conversations with a Gentle Soul* (PanMacmillan 2017).

Alongside this echoing question there was, and continues to be, active political unrest as more and more people are unhappy with the perceived corruption of the current leadership. Calls for country-wide strikes were common while the Council was there. I saw handmade protest signs leaning against walls in many private homes. President Jacob Zuma, in power

since 1994, has been charged with multiple improprieties involving corruption, misuse of state funds, and immoral personal behavior. While some of this has been resolved, one feels throughout the country a rising impatience with the status quo and deep questioning of the future of this beautiful and often troubled country.

Waldorf education was born into this racially tense country in 1957, and there are now seventeen schools in South Africa. This land is wildly diverse with unpredictable weather. The vegetation is so diverse that South Africa claims one floral kingdom all its own. In some places, the sun is so strong that the plants are small and delicate; in others, where the climate is misty and damp, plants are large with broad leaves while in still others, the ground is completely sandy and hardly anything grows. There are five Waldorf schools in the north, eleven in the western Cape, and one school in the east. There are still no schools in the middle of the country.



The Waldorf school movement has not significantly grown in recent decades; it is very hard to find trained teachers or even people who are willing to go into training. Another challenge is with the government; for the last twelve years the Michael Mount Waldorf School, in Johannesburg, has been working on behalf of all the Waldorf schools to get government acceptance of Waldorf education. The man who has been carrying this work described it as taking one step forward and two steps backward. At the moment, the government acknowledges a responsibility to accredit alternative schools, but they can only do one school per year. They have committed to accrediting the Waldorf school first, which will take a year and cost up to 150,000 rand (almost \$12,000), but this commitment has

come and gone before. While people are hopeful, they are also somewhat skeptical.

One wonderful development has been the Centre for Creative Education, founded in the 1990s, which trains local women and helps them create childcare centers in the townships. Several Council members visited these childcare centers in the townships around Cape Town and Johannesburg. They were shocked to see how bare these childcare centers are yet also inspired and awe-struck by the all-encompassing warmth of the women who run them. Having nothing at all, they give soul warmth to the children, and that is enough.

In looking toward the future, the South African Federation of Waldorf Schools is asking itself how it can support these township programs and the teachers who remember the goodness of their own childhoods and want to give that, and the richness of their own culture, to the children in their care. The Federation is also reevaluating what works in the schools and what doesn't, in light of the questions of what freedom means and how the hard-won freedom from the years of apartheid will be used. It seems to me that this is a question that rings ever more loudly around the world in these times and is one which we must all individually and collectively address. ♦

