

From the Memories of a Waldorf School Teacher

*Advent-time in the Waldorf School*

By Alexander Strakosch

For many of our contemporaries the year is nothing more than a sequence of 365 days. Every seventh day is a Sunday, when instead of going to the factory or to the office, one goes to a football-match and is provoked at the decision of umpire instead of at one's overseer. Furthermore there are certain times of year when one perspires, because it is very hot outside, and others when one grumbles over the size of the coal-bills. Otherwise one day is like another and the whole calendar is there merely in order that one may divide up the year for personal and business purposes.

For such people the seasons of the year have a purely outer significance only, and the festivals are a purely human device, the last remnants of a time of ancient superstition.

We encounter such signs of the impoverishment of the life of the human soul at every step. And we learn to estimate how difficult it really is to-day for so many to find access to the realities which seek to speak to us through the seasons and the festivals of the year.

This is the situation among adults, but something quite different lives in the souls of the children. Much is deadened, it is true, by the above-mentioned attitude of many grown-ups, but in the souls which have newly become young there sounds, still with inner warmth of feeling, a kind of memory of the worlds which they have but recently left. Only a tiny shock is necessary to lift a little the dull covering which the attitude of the grown-ups has laid over the delicate blossoms of the soul-life of childhood, and with joyful reverence one may witness how the Christmas festival, for instance, is just as real for children as is the outer warmth of the sun for older people. Where the attempt was made to do justice to the unfolding human being, where Rudolf Steiner's helping love was present – as in the Waldorf School - it was possible to experience how the time of Advent can lead us to experience as a reality the expectation of the moment when the event of the cosmic hour is to renew itself in the human soul. Large and small united in this joyful expectation. Not only outwardly did the school reverberate with Christmas songs which began and ended the school day, but a Christmas element also wove its way through the teaching itself. A skeptic might be of the opinion that it is not difficult to bring children into a certain desired atmosphere. Those who were there, however, know that it was not simply an "atmosphere", but experienced reality. What took place on the part of the older people was merely, rightly to answer what sounded forth expectantly out of the souls of the children, requesting, as it were, to be received with loving understanding and guided along the right path. The latter was indeed necessary, for a true profusion of the forces of joy and of fantasy sprang to life there, seeking to find their expression in wingedness of soul and artistic activity. On such occasions it becomes quite clear how even the little human being experiences artistic activity as the truest expression of his bond of, union with higher worlds and beings.

On the day before the first Sunday in Advent the various classes went out into the woods to get pine boughs. Naturally the class-teachers had, unknown to the children, secured a permit from the forestry authorities. Trimmings of evergreen then adorned the walls, and in every classroom there hung an Advent wreath with ribbons and lights. During the morning verse each child often had a little light on his bench before him; the old, beloved Christmas songs resounded and then the lessons began.

A Christmas element permeated these lessons themselves, and many a teacher considered at the beginning of the school year which "epoch" of study he would have fall at this time. How differently, for instance, the conversion of the Saxon duke Witukind is taken in at this time, than if one were to tell about it in the summer! Around Christmas time - so we are told - the battles ceased, the Franks celebrated the birth of Christ, the Saxons the Jul-festival. Witukund's great soul did not harden itself in hate against his opponents, he wanted to understand, to experience what they, worshipped, the recognition of which was however to be forced upon him.

So, disguised as a beggar, he crept into the encampment of the Franks accompanied by a trusted companion, in order to overhear the Christmas midnight mass. He saw the king and all his men kneeling before the simple altar and suddenly his eyes were opened and above the altar he beheld the Child Who had descended to those human beings who wished to prepare a place for Him in their hearts.

In this way Christianity became for him a "mystical fact" and no forceful attempts at conversion were longer necessary.

Told during the time of Advent, such a story not only stirred the children in the deepest sense, but came as an answer to what their hearts longed for.

It is also characteristic of their nature that they wish to be active themselves, to bring to expression outwardly what they are inwardly filled with - and how natural it is for them to dramatise! I remember from my own childhood how we always agreed quickly as to the general plot to be enacted, and then we simply began to act with hardly any stumbling or interruption.

During Advent the childish fantasy turns quite naturally and of its own accord to the event of Christ's birth and its reception by the shepherds and kings, urging them on quite spontaneously to enact Christmas plays. But in the Waldorf School, in this respect also, the children are not left to themselves in a wrong way. Through the fact that the teacher represents a joyfully recognized authority, it comes about, that he can best of all show them how a beautiful Christmas play may be brought into being. This does not hinder at all the development of the children's own fantasy, for in the artistic sphere the example works actively, and the plays which they then enact at home are fructified, raised to a higher level, through the impulses they have received. That everything becomes still more wonderful when it is done with their teacher is a matter of course for Waldorf School children.

The choice of Christmas plays is very large, but it is really best of all when the teacher himself writes a play and creates the roles to fit the figure, or better said the soul, of each actor. Once a somewhat sleepy little boy played the part of a shepherd who was also much inclined to sleep and thus missed the moment when the angel appeared to the shepherds, and this enacted experience made a lasting impression upon the child.

In this play all the children of the class took part, either as actors or as musicians. Every child can play the violin or the flute. And so the procession of the "Kumpanei" entered, led by little angels in white dresses with wings, a golden crown and flowing hair, and they played upon their strings and fluted most beautifully to the joy of all. There are Mary, Joseph, shepherds, kings and their train to be represented, and every child easily finds an opportunity to take an active part.

On the last day before the festival the parents and all special teachers who work with the class are invited to watch the play; and the special teachers who give lessons in several classes, as well as the parents who have children in different classes, simply do not know how they are to manage to be everywhere at once, for all classes lay special weight upon the fact that you must appear at their play, not out of vanity, but because they wish to be united with their teachers and parents at such festive moments. \*

A little incident will be related here which can show how the children were bound up with the play and the whole procedure of preparation.

A teacher had himself written a play for his class, and what the teacher himself creates always lives for the children in quite another way than something which comes from someone unknown to them, be it ever so beautiful. But this play was really more beautiful than the Christmas plays that can be found in books, and the children were absorbed in it with complete devotion. Yet a strange fate followed the actor of the Moorish king. The one who was first intended to play the part became ill, as did the second, and what is more, on the day of the performance itself. To the surprise of the teacher a very loving, but otherwise shy, little boy, who was nearly always turned in upon himself, came forward and offered to take over the role. There was no time to rehearse, or memorise, and so the teacher announced to the assembly immediately before the opening of the play that in the face of the facts nothing else was possible than that he should prompt the actor who had so bravely jumped into the part. It was a happy surprise for all to see with what life and freshness the little one acted, and the whole performance took its course to the satisfaction of everyone. The audience had left, the individual children said good-bye to the teacher, and I happened to come just at the moment when the latter thanked the brave little Moorish King. The little one gave the teacher a bright smile and said without the least bit of pose "I have always known that I should once really play the Moorish King!"

If one passed through the school during Advent at any time of day, or I could almost say of night, one felt as if in an ensouled brightness; outwardly as well, the air resounded on all sides, one hardly knew from where, either with the old songs or the well-known melodies with which Leopold van der Pals has enlivened the Oberuferer Christmas plays.

The night-hours had something quite of their own. It was then that the teachers rehearsed the Oberuferer Christmas play which was re-discovered in the vicinity of Pressburg by Karl Julius Schroer and published by him. Rudolf Steiner had it performed for the first time at Dornach and as the final festival of Advent, as the beginning of the actual Christmas-time, the teachers performed it each year for the children, and thus united in grateful thoughts of Rudolf Steiner who held the school so close to his heart. Also our dear school-father, Emil Molt, was always there in our midst.

Because the school had over 1000 children, the plays were given once for the smaller and again for the older children. While, in the case of the former, what was enacted passed over into immediate experience, the latter were at first in a state of excitement as to which teacher, for instance, would play this or that role this year, and only gradually became absorbed in the play itself. But when, at the end, the devil had carried away Herod in a gruesome way into hell, both large and small were thoroughly lost in the spell of the drama which was taking place. This spell was then broken in an artistic folk-manner through the fact that, while the whole "Kumpaneï" marched up ceremoniously onto the brightly lighted stage, the devil, with comical jumps and all sorts of pranks, disposed of King Herod's throne. Everybody laughed again, and filled with true Christmas joy, the final chorus resounded with its mighty rhythm and the intimate beauty with which it sounds out in the end. It resounded then in the ear and in the soul throughout all the holy days.

Soon, however, it came about that the grown-ups wished also to see the plays, and thus the performances for the children were followed by two public ones which were always overcrowded and gratefully received.