

Kindergarten Teachers Around the World
Synopsis of an Interview about Bronja Zahlingen
Stephen Spitalny

This is one in a series of upcoming articles describing the work and life of kindergarten teachers from around the world. The idea is to offer pictures of a variety of approaches to the young child. This issue we feature a synopsis of an interview by Stephen Spitalny of Ronna McEldowney who worked in Bronja Zahlingen's kindergarten near Vienna, Austria, as a part time assistant in the 1979/80 school year.

Bronja Zahlingen was born of a Jewish family in Poland on January 8, 1912. When she was a baby, her parents bundled her in furs, put her on a sledge, and the family walked to Vienna. Bronja was courted by Hans Zahlingen in Vienna before WWII, but as a person of Jewish background, Bronja had to leave Austria, and she went to England for the duration of the war. When the war was over, Bronja's future husband sought her there and brought her back to Vienna where they were married. They had one son in 1950.

Between 1932 and 1938 Bronja had built up the Waldorf kindergarten work in Vienna. After the war she took up the work again. In 1955 she opened a kindergarten in the city, but when a school opened in a former castle in Mauer, at the edge of Vienna, she was able to buy a piece of land nearby for a kindergarten. This was financed by a close friend who donated the money from the sale of a small painting by Breughel. As a teacher she was active in developing the children's religious services and was a service holder as well as a free religion teacher.

Bronja Zahlingen was a very small woman with glasses and long gray hair, always braided and in a bun. She was a hard worker, who spent a lot of time in the garden constantly busy at something. Working with her was an initiation through doing.

Bronja was very artistic and creative. Among her specialties were seasonal wool fleece pictures and silk pictures made from scraps of beautifully draped colored silk pinned to a background. She made toys and was well known for her beautiful dolls. She taught an ongoing weekly doll-making course and her faithful group of mothers made dolls for the Christmas fair.

Bronja's festivals were huge productions. Each one was different, but they were all enchanted and magical. She would take days to transform her room for a festival. She performed puppet shows in a variety of styles, using marionettes, stick puppets, or table puppets and she performed with her puppets many times in the U.S. She loved to tell the story of a little boy in Detroit who was watching her play and wanted to say something. His mother kept silencing him. At last, when the play was finished, he could hold back no longer. He burst out, saying, "But mamma, these are real puppets!" Many of her stories are printed in *Plays for Puppets*, published by WECAN.

Another specialty of Bronja's was her circle games, full of imaginative, archetypal movement, breathing between joy and levity and seriousness and reverence. Bronja also did a number of fairy tales and circle games, including *The Queen Bee*, *The Miller's Boy and the Cat*, and *The Turnip*.

Bronja was very accessible, able to meet people in love and openness, not in judgement. She was compassionate with children, able to cheer them up through sympathy. As an example of her approach to the child, she could turn a particular child's weakness into a strength. For example, there was a child who would take things in the kindergarten. Bronja would turn it around by

saying, “Who has golden eyes to find the missing so and so?” Bronja was able to inspire the children to do well. The children played so well that her intervention was rarely called for.

Bronja was a master storyteller. One story that she told follows: *A mother and son were walking on a steep road. They came upon a broken down cart in the road. The driver of the cart asked them for help and the mother and son helped him fix the cart. The boy lifted the cart while the mother and the man fixed the wheel. When the repair was done, the man offered them wine, though he did not have any cups. The mother picked a flower and had the man pour the wine into the flower cup. To this day you can still see the mark from Mother Mary’s wine in the morning glory.*
