

Waldorf Around the World: Estonia

— Louise deForest

Estonia, a gateway between east and west, is a little-known country that borders the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland. Although it is small (it takes three hours to cross the country by car), it includes 1,500 islands. It has a population of 1,325,000 and, until recently, it was primarily an agricultural economy. Today, with the huge growth in the technical industries (did you know that Skype was created in Estonia?), many old farms lie abandoned in the beautiful countryside as young people opt to live in the cities. In this culturally rich country, IASWECE had its Fall 2016 meeting and there met and worked with ECSWE (European Council of Steiner/Waldorf Education), which has representatives from all the EU countries.

Estonia has had a long history of foreign occupation; since the 13th century, Estonia has been occupied by Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Russia and Poland. It wasn't until 1918 that Estonia declared its independence, fighting Russia on one border and Germany on the other. They reinstated their language (a Finnic branch of the Uralic language family – related to Finnish, Hungarian and Sami) and revived

their national song festivals and Estonian literature. This freedom did not last long. In 1944 Estonia was occupied by the Nazis, followed by the USSR. It wasn't until 1991 that the country became independent once again, eventually joining the European Union in 2004.

Waldorf education in Estonia began in 1989 with the founding of a school in Tartu, where ECSWE and IASWECE met this year. Today there are nine schools, three of which have upper grades, several with double classes, and two curative education schools. There are eleven kindergartens located in the north and south of the country; there are still no Waldorf schools in the center of the country. The Waldorf movement started out very strongly; with their national independence a mood of enthusiasm for all that was new swept the country. But as they say in Estonia, “It is easy to become a hero; harder to stay a hero.” In 1998 the Waldorf schools were inspected by the state and much was found lacking. Critical articles followed, parents withdrew their children, faculty resigned, and it took eight years for the Waldorf movement to recover. Hard as it was, this

was an awakening moment for the Waldorf schools. They became aware of their weaknesses and focused on rebuilding the schools with stronger foundations. Today there are 1,065 children attending Waldorf schools, up from 399 children in 2008. As with many schools around the world, finding trained teachers is difficult, which means it is also hard for the schools to expand.

There is a part-time teacher training in Tartu, but many people travel to Germany or Finland for their training. The teacher training in Tartu has had a positive and productive relationship with the University of Tartu for many years, and the Waldorf teachers who graduate have a university certificate as well as a Waldorf one. There is now a possibility of offering full-time teacher training, but it has not started yet.

All the Waldorf schools are private schools and as such are funded by the state as well as by the local municipality. Funds from the state are given per student and can be used for renovation of buildings or to put towards a new building, as well as covering teachers' salaries. A proposed new law wants to make municipal funding voluntary. With this new threat, all private schools in Estonia, Waldorf and non-Waldorf, have bonded together to resist this law. Parents, too, are siding with the private schools; indeed, parents are much more aware of the privilege of education than in other European countries; and they are thoughtful about where they send their children. This outer threat has brought all the private schools of Estonia together as a united movement, which can only strengthen the Waldorf movement within the country.

A big challenge that was mentioned often during our meetings was the number of special needs children in each classroom. Because Waldorf education can be helpful and supportive for those children who have different learning styles, many parents are filling the Waldorf schools with children with unusual behavioral and learning needs, and the teachers are not trained to work with these children. As in many schools, the teachers are stressed and overwhelmed and often feel that they are not teaching but, instead, valiantly trying to

deal with the behaviors in class each day. Most of the teachers I met are very dedicated and striving to do their best, but they do not have the tools they need or the enrollment in their schools to be able to keep the number of special needs children down to a manageable size for each teacher.

IASWECE tries to meet in a member country each year but this year we especially wanted to be in Estonia to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Helmut von K ugelgen's birth there, in what is now Tallinn. Claudia McKeen, one of his five daughters, was there to speak about him as a father; Philipp Reubke was present to speak about him as a class teacher, and Stefan Grosse spoke about him and his role as a religious instructor in the Waldorf school. I was especially touched by Claudia's memory of waking in the night as a small child many times and seeing the light on in her father's study from the upstairs hallway and knowing that all was well in the world. These reminiscences were followed by instrumental and choral performances and skits offered by Estonian teachers and students.

ECSWE and IASWECE and faculty members of the Waldorf school hosted a public conference addressing the questions of media literacy, transition from kindergarten to the grades, and assessments. Three speakers presented different perspectives on the use of technology in education, ranging from an enthusiastic across-the-board endorsement to a cautious age-limited use. Afterwards, three groups were formed to discuss and deepen the above themes; and many Estonian teachers participated.

The presence of IASWECE and ECSWE representatives gave a much needed boost to the local Waldorf teachers and Waldorf schools, reminding them that they are part of a strong and vital worldwide movement that has the potential to renew the culture of each and every country. ◆

Louise deForest, as an independent consultant to Waldorf schools, travels the world offering lectures on early childhood education, mentoring support and early childhood teacher training. She is a WECAN Board member and is one of two representatives of North America to IASWECE.

Supporting Waldorf Education Around the World: Turkey

Waldorf early childhood education is establishing tender roots in turbulent times in Turkey, the cultural and geographic border and meeting ground between Europe and the Middle East. Small Waldorf-inspired kindergartens have opened in recent years in Istanbul on the Bosphorus, in Bodrum and Antalya on the Mediterranean coast, and in Eskisehir in the interior. There are now several small Waldorf-inspired playgroups as well. The first Waldorf school opened this past fall in Antalya, where the Waldorf training courses are located.



Under the current political/cultural circumstances, it takes great courage to take responsibility for founding or teaching in a Waldorf or other alternative kindergarten, running an “alternative” kindergarten training, or, as parents, participating in forming Waldorf communities. The enthusiasm and commitment of Turkish Waldorf parents, teachers and trainers is inspiring. Their Association, the Friends of Waldorf Education in Turkey - Eğitim Sanatı Derneği Türkçe - has turned to experienced colleagues in IASWECE and worldwide to help them establish a strong foundation for Waldorf education in Turkey through training courses and mentoring. Approximately \$6000 is needed this year for training courses, mentoring, and bringing together colleagues to strengthen their work.



We have raised over \$3600 at conferences in Spring Valley and in the Pacific Northwest, and encourage those who would like to offer support for Turkey to send a check to the WECAN Office at the following address: **WECAN - for Turkey, 285 Hungry Hollow Road, Spring Valley, New York, 10977.** Further details at iaswece.org.