

Gudrun Koller's angel tapestries: Work with at-risk children

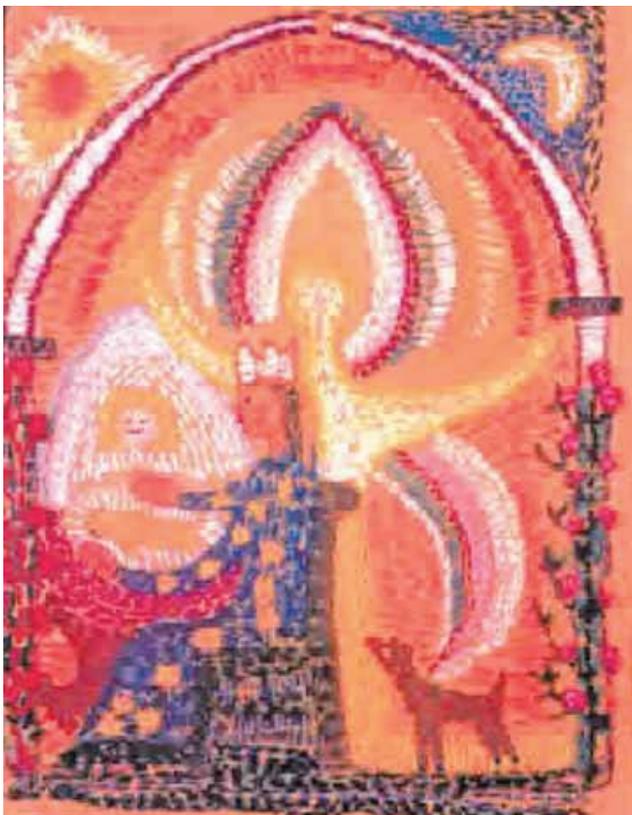
(Reprinted by kind permission of *Waldorf Today*, first published: 5 June, 2012)

Gudrun Koller was born 1942 in Leverkusen, Germany. She studied to become a primary helper and curative teacher, completed her Steiner teacher training and studied speech formation. After teaching in a Steiner school, she became a public school teacher in Zurich, Switzerland in District Four, an area historically inhabited by migrant workers. Aussersihl, especially its Langstrasse quarter, remains notorious for its high quota of foreigners, high crime rate, prostitution and drug dealing.

"There is a reason why this particular school district was declared a disaster area. With an almost totally foreign population, the children come from the most difficult social conditions. Teaching begins with us first having breakfast together. I prefer to pay for that out of myself

rather than watch the children 'breakfast' solely on Coke, Red Bull and such things. In most cases, both parents are working. As a rule, the children are not cared for enough, so that in the first grade they often have a soul development deficiency of three to four years."

"The parents are always under pressure to achieve more. By means of signed leasing contracts, they live beyond their means. They do not get enough sleep and they eat irregularly. Under these tensions they lose patience and frequently hit and otherwise abuse their children. We can see the results on their bodies when they dress to swim, for example. But actually, little can be done. Even professional counsellors are helpless. The families merely change to another



district of the city when it gets too risky and start again. I don't consider it my job to judge or even call in the police. I am a confident, the teacher of these children, and have to suffer this powerlessness, too. Only in this way can I give the children a place where they can have security at least during the day along with boundaries and meaning. All the same, the first graders already receive up to twenty-six hours of teaching in a week."

Working with the children in District Four inspired Gudrun Koller to guide them in creating the "Angel Tapestries" in her after school programme.

"I experience children – and especially the children here – as unusually open to the spiritual world, for the life of the spirit. For them it is very clear: there are angels, there are guardian angels and, by means of the embroidery, there



are angels that are months in the making; the children come into inner conversation with these helping guardian angels."

"The children themselves brought me to it ten years ago through the initiative of a young boy: "There was a dead man in front of our door. The police came. Please draw me an angel; I want to embroider it."

"In the school these children have so many lessons of 'instruction' and little time for digestion. In order for the parents to be able to work, blocks were set up with afternoon child care, because the maximum time for lessons for first graders was eighteen hours a week. So instead we work – usually daily – on these embroidered pictures. The picture's design is put on burlap with wax crayons and then stretched onto a wooden frame. The work can then begin with thick embroidery needles and many colours. The children are free to choose the kind of stitches. Since embroidery is not part of the school curriculum at this age level, I have to pay for all the materials myself.

"I came to this project because I was desperately looking for something meaningful for the children to do on these long school days. Otherwise they often get bored, aggressive and difficult. With an artistic activity like embroidery, they become quiet inwardly and a beautiful atmosphere in the classroom is created." ♦

