

ME Conference 2006 Vienna

The Montessori congress in Vienna October

by Britta Bring

I love going to Montessori congresses. All the participants, all the exhibitions, the valuable workshops, the chats with friendly people- all this because of the engagement we all have in Maria Montessori's philosophy.

When I went to Vienna for this congress, I thought about the time 70-75 years ago when Maria Montessori herself was in Vienna. I can imagine her, this handsome lady, strong in character and full of hope and conviction, walking in the streets of this beautiful old city. The Marriott Hotel, where the congress was held, is a beautiful hotel. Teachers are not often treated in this luxurious way. I think that many of us felt special just being there.

The theme of the congress was Democracy in Education. How can the Montessori way of learning contribute to democracy? We got many examples of that during the three days of lectures and workshops. How should a congress about learning start if not with children on the stage? They were there, the children singing national songs from about 20 countries, which were represented on the congress. With each song sung in the native language of the respective participating country with matching flag, they gave a welcoming and charming performance. They were children of the World.

After a few official welcomes we heard a lecture on Learning and Working in the Prospective Knowledge Society, by Matthias Horx, Germany. He gave a perspective on educational strategies from the beginning of the century and onwards – especially the periods around Maria Montessori and what she had to face in her career. His opinion was that Maria Montessori is in tune with our fashion in education today! The evening was spent at a reception in the Vienna City Hall. The candelabras were lit, the tables were set traditionally with the table cloths tied around the table legs. The tables were placed in two straight rows. Very elegant! This was another interesting and inspiring feeling - having the possibility to experience some different culture. Saturday started with a speech by Professor Johannes Riedl, Austria. The title of his talk was Montessori Education: Essential for School Development. His lecture gave an orientation of how Montessori Education has contributed to the work in "traditional" schools. He talked about independence, liberty, control of yourself, children shaping their own world, creativity, learning as an individual act – all these items that we as montessorians are very familiar with. He also stressed the importance of joy in learning and how lack of success can lead to depression. For me, as a Swede, it was especially interesting because the Swedish Montessori Association every year has seminars on the same subject - Montessori in the Compulsory School.

The afternoon offered Ongoing Development Groups and workshops. The Ongoing Development Groups draw big audience because there is a strong

interest among the members to develop networks between teachers and schools. There is a great need for exchanging of ideas! Also the wish to set standards was noticeable, especially for Secondary Schools. The workshops offered a wide range of subjects -17 groups – all tied to the theme of the congress – Democracy in Education. How I wished that I could have participated in every group!

The Reception at the Albertinerkeller - traditional Heuriger place - offered tasty food, a nice atmosphere and time to mingle. The Austrian Montessori Association kindly entertained the participants. Sunday morning started with a performance unusual for serious Montessori gatherings. A Montessori teacher appeared as a clown wanting to be served something to "eat." She was very happy when she was served one of the cylinder blocks. With the help of this block she tried out all her senses in order to find out which one to use. Having found out, she became very satisfied and calmly enjoyed her findings. Only a trained Montessori teacher could have handled the block the way she did. The audience was highly appreciative to her performance. There was a lot of relaxing laughter.

The lecture by Mrs Sighle Fitzgerald, Ireland was the finishing lecture. Many are those students and trained teachers in several continents have taken in her wisdom, her experience and her deep understanding of the Montessori Philosophy during 35-40 years. The title of her lecture was Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in Early Childhood. Mrs Fitzgerald was very impressive in the way she used practical classroom examples of how to help a child develop democracy and in the way she showed how not to be extreme or unreasonable in applying Montessori Principles. Love and common sense is her tool in the classroom.

Next year there is the Centenary Celebration of the opening of the first Casa dei Bambini in Rome. Many Montessorians from many different training institutes and branches around the world will be active in this. Now is the time for cooperation between all of us. The President of AMI, Mr André Roberfroid, France, who was participating in the congress in Vienna, expressed these hopeful thoughts. There is no better platform for the year of celebration than this – united Montessorians helping to build democracy in children and young people!

Thank you Austria for having organised this important conference!

Britta Bring

Sweden

Resigning member of the Executive Committee