



CHAPTER 2

THE FOUNDING OF THE FIRST WALDORF SCHOOL: IDEALS, CHALLENGES, AND COMPROMISES

In the end, the Waldorf School movement is connected to the threefold movement. The Waldorf School movement is conceivable only within a free spiritual life.⁹

Today I would like to speak to you about the Waldorf School, founded by our friend Mr. Molt. You know from the announcements distributed about this school that our intention is to take a first step along the path we would want the cultural life of the Threefold Social Organism to take. In establishing the Waldorf School, Mr. Molt has, to a large extent, felt motivated to do something to further the development of inner spirituality. He hopes to do something that will point the way for the present and future social tasks of the Threefold Social Organism.¹⁰

– Rudolf Steiner

In 1919, Emil Molt was the esteemed company director and a shareholder in the Waldorf Astoria Cigarette Factory in Stuttgart, Germany, although he did not own sufficient stock to have controlling interest. Molt was held in such high regard by his workers that they called him “father.” Similarly, Molt’s paternal concern for his workers went far beyond the life of the factory. Once, for example, when he heard of a worker who was suffering from an illness due to a lack of proper nourishment, Molt bought his family a cow to provide milk.

In addition to his concern for the well-being of his workers, Molt had a deep appreciation for Rudolf Steiner’s social ideas and

the importance of education as a social force. He had been particularly inspired by Steiner's pamphlet "Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy,"¹¹ which was published in 1907 long before there was any school initiative. The pedagogical and social ideals expressed there by Steiner kindled an inner flame in Molt that would blaze forth years later when outer destiny provided the opportunity to start a children's school. Molt ascribed the terrible events of World War I to a failure in education, and after the war he established an educational program for his workers that included a wide variety of topics, such as foreign languages, painting, history, geography, and current events. Although the workers were appreciative of the adult education courses, attendance dwindled over time because they found it difficult to keep up the classes after a hard day's work, and their minds had fallen out of the habit of learning about new things. Molt described that, following the termination of the adult classes,

[I] became absorbed by the idea of providing for children what was no longer possible in later years, and of opening the door to education for all children, regardless of their parents' income.

This idea became extremely pertinent after a conversation I had with one of my factory workers. I had been told that his son was recommended for higher education by his teacher on the basis of his grades. I saw the pride and joy in the father's face, and experienced what it means for a worker if his child is given such an opportunity, with the possibility of improving his station in life. But I also experienced how this joy is dampened when funds are not available—when the father simply does not have the means to pay for tuition and school supplies. I felt the tragedy of the working class: to be held back by lack of money from sharing in the education of the richer middle class. I also had a sense of what it would mean for social progress if we could support a new educational endeavor within our factory.

I began to share some of these ideas with my employees. They were immediately delighted by the notion of their own school, mainly because

*of the experiences they had gained during their [adult] lessons [at the factory]. The enthusiasm spread.*¹²

Thus destiny provided Molt with the opportunity to act out of both his deepest personal paternal feelings for his workers and what he considered the highest social ideals embodied in the movement for a threefold social organism. As already mentioned, several attempts had been made to introduce threefolding on a grand scale, and Molt was active in many of these. In the founding of a children's school he saw a new opportunity to "take a first step along the path we would want the cultural life of the Threefold Social Organism to take" and "to do something to further the development of inner spirituality."

The basis of cultural life in a threefold social organism is *freedom*. Molt and Steiner tried to permeate the school—its teaching methods, governance structure, and relations to the state—with this principle. There are four aspects to the principle of freedom, and Molt and Steiner attempted to address all of them in the founding of the first Waldorf School.

One is freedom from outer coercion and indoctrination. State compulsory school attendance and licensing of schools are examples of coercion. Standardized curricula and testing for students, and state teacher training requirements are examples of indoctrination techniques. Steiner and Molt did everything possible to create a school in which the teachers, parents, and students could operate with as little outside control as possible.

A second aspect has to do with the removal of soul obstacles and bodily hindrances that can prevent a person from acting freely. In keeping with this aspect of freedom, Waldorf teaching methods and curriculum can be seen as hygienic measures that help harmonize body movements and the major soul functions of thinking, feeling, and willing. An imbalance or overemphasis of any one of these soul functions can actually introduce inner obstacles to becoming a self-reliant human being. An example of this is the preoccupation

of modern education with cultivating the intellectual or thinking capacities of the child while neglecting the proper development of the life of feeling and will. Waldorf education can also be viewed as therapeutic in the sense that to a limited degree a Waldorf education can counterbalance harmful influences that a child may be exposed to in other aspects of his or her life.

A third aspect has to do with the full development of latent capacities needed to carry out one's decisions. It has already been mentioned that one of the goals of a Waldorf teacher is to develop the ability to sense what capacities in the child are wanting to unfold rather than viewing the child in behavioristic terms as a being to be filled with what the existing state and the economy need in order to perpetuate themselves.

Finally, in modern life the full development of self-reliant, capable, and free individuals can be thwarted through economic dependency. Consequently, it is essential for a healthy social organism to provide for a fair distribution of wealth so that there is financial opportunity and freedom of choice in education for every person. The extraordinary efforts by Molt and Steiner to raise sufficient funds so that every family who wanted to send their children to the first Waldorf school could do so will be described in the next chapter.

In early 1919, Molt told Steiner that he was going to speak to local government officials about the possibility of starting a school. Shortly thereafter, he made the decision to ask Steiner formerly for his help and guidance. It was on April 23, 1919, after a lecture Steiner gave to the factory workers, titled "Proletarian Demands and How to Put Them into Practice,"¹³ that Molt asked Steiner to take on the planning and leadership of the new school. Molt later said he considered this the true birth date of the school.¹⁴ Steiner enthusiastically accepted the task.

An appropriate characterization of the facts would be to say that Emil Molt was the founder of the first Waldorf school and that Steiner was the founder of the Waldorf School Movement and the

source of its pedagogical methods. Due to a blend of fiery idealism and practical skills that both Molt and Steiner exhibited, the new school opened on September 15, 1919, in a renovated Stuttgart restaurant purchased by Molt, less than five months after Steiner agreed to help. The school began with eight grades and 256 children.

Great deeds meet many obstacles, some foreseen and some not. Molt encountered the usual assortment of logistical challenges, but one that he did not foresee was opposition by the local priest. When the priest heard that parents from his diocese were intending to enroll their children in the new school at the Waldorf Astoria factory, he informed the families that any child who attended the school would not be allowed to receive communion. He assumed that all the children would be indoctrinated in Anthroposophy at the school. Two Catholic factory workers asked for a meeting with the priest to hear in detail his reasons for proclaiming such a harsh punishment for what they considered to be a joyous and positive opportunity for their children. The two workers asked Molt to join them for the meeting. It was clear from the start that the priest's main concern was the relation of the school to Anthroposophy, and he declared that the school would be sectarian. Molt was well prepared for such an opinion and addressed the priest's concerns with candor and truthfulness. He explained that the school would not be teaching Anthroposophy and that during religious instruction time every religious denomination would be represented by its own priests or ministers. By the end of the meeting the two employees were so emboldened by Molt's candid responses that they firmly told the priest, "We will send our children to the Waldorf School even if the Bishop denies them communion, and you can just go and tell him that."¹⁵ There was no need for such rebellious action because the priest reversed his decision and all the Catholic children in his diocese were granted permission to attend the Waldorf School.

A major area of concern was the reaction by the local authorities to the school. It was only through the narrowest political window of opportunity that the Waldorf School was founded in 1919 fol-

lowing the collapse of the German government in 1918. Even so, certain compromises had to be made. The three most significant ones that Steiner worked out with the education department were:

- 1) The local Board of Education had to approve the school.
- 2) Each teacher had to demonstrate that he or she was academically and morally fit to teach.
- 3) Students in the Waldorf School had to achieve learning goals equivalent to the local public school by the end of the third, sixth, and eighth grades so they could transfer out of the Waldorf School if their families so wished.¹⁶

But in his negotiations with the officials Steiner was forthright regarding his long-term goals, as described by Erich Gabert's introduction to *Rudolf Steiner's Conferences with the Teachers of the Waldorf School in Stuttgart*:

*Rudolf Steiner never left the Minister of Education in any doubt that he had no intention of retreating one step from the principle of complete independence from the state. Indeed he made this clear by calling it the Independent Waldorf School [Freie Waldorfschule]. But with the legal situation as it was there was no way of achieving this except with compromises.*¹⁷

The fact that government officials recognized Steiner's and Molt's goal of maintaining independence from the state was later confirmed by an inspector who did an in-depth study of the school in 1926 for the State of Württemberg.

*The School is called the Free Waldorf School. It is free in the sense that it is not bound by any State curriculum—free, too, in the sense that it is not supported financially either by the State or by the town of Stuttgart, but is dependent entirely upon its own resources.*¹⁸

In a private address to the teachers before the opening of the school, Steiner explained his position regarding the compromises that he made with the State.

Compromises are necessary, as we have not yet reached the point where we can accomplish an absolutely free deed. The State will tell us how to teach and what results to aim for, and what the State prescribes will be bad. Its targets are the worst ones imaginable, yet it expects to get the best possible results. Today's politics work in the direction of regimentation, and it will go even further than this in its attempts to make people conform. Human beings will be treated like puppets on strings, and this will be regarded as progress in the extreme. Institutions like schools will be organized in the most arrogant and unsuitable manner. A foretaste of this can be seen in the example of the Russian Bolshevik schools that are the death of any real education. We shall have a hard fight, yet we have to perform this cultural deed.

Two opposite forces have to be harmonized in the course of our work. On the one hand, we must know what our ideals are, yet we must be flexible enough to adapt ourselves to things that are far removed from our ideals. The difficult task of harmonizing these two forces stands before each of you. And you will only achieve this if you engage all the forces of your personality into it. Each one of you will have to put your whole personality into it right from the start.¹⁹

At this point in the narrative, readers may think that it would be too harsh to characterize recent educational reform efforts of the United States government in such terms today. It will be shown later, however, that equally strong characterizations can be applied to the modern educational goals, standards, and assessments now being developed and implemented through the collaboration of big business and the federal and state governments.