

From the Montessori Teachers Collective (MOTECO.ORG)

How It All Happened - Maria Montessori, 1942

Today is the anniversary of the opening of the first House of Children. When I tell you briefly how it started, the few words of its history will seem like a fairy-tale, but their message may prove useful.

Many times people ask with doubt in their minds whether the method is suitable for poor children or whether it is at all adaptable to them.

In order that you may be able to answer such questions, I should like you to have a small idea of how our work started, of the indirect way in which it has arisen.

It came about in a strange way, I have pondered much about it and tried to understand the reason for it. I don't know if it is an indication of destiny, or if it was established by fate itself. All that I know is that it has something to do with the House itself. It may seem curious that I express it in this way but I do so to render the ensuing story clear.

Many years ago, Rome was a capital of a state in very rapid development, which manifested itself in a mania for building. Every small available space was utilized to build houses, every little open space. One of the many was delimited on one side by the old Roman-walls which had witnessed many battles and on the other by the modern cemetery. This area was the last place to be filled, no doubt because of the superstition that it was not lucky to live near the dead, for fear of ghosts and also for hygienic reasons.

But probably because of the beautiful and historical situation, one building society decided to stake its money into building there. It was a tremendous scheme, five houses on the scale of palaces, 5 or 6 stories high. But the idea had been too vast so that the society went bankrupt before the buildings were completed and the scheme failed. There were only the walls with open holes for doors and windows, there was no plumbing and the erections stood as a sort of skeleton.

For many years this enormous skeleton remained abandoned and neglected. It became a shelter for homeless beggars, a hiding place for evil-doers who wished to avoid recognition and who if discovered, could easily escape into this labyrinth. Criminals of all sorts, thieves and murderers, took refuge in them. People lived there in the same conditions as the cavemen of old did in their caves. All those who were homeless, and those who wished to hide, found shelter within those walls. Even the police did not go near them, or dared to, as they did not know their way within these grim walls of crime and horror.

Slowly, the number grew, until thousands of people crowded in these abandoned buildings. People were found dead, murdered or succumbed to diseases; the place became a breeding place of infection for the whole land; a center of crime and of the lowest prostitution.

The 'Quartiere di San Lorenzo' became known as the shame of Italy. People were too afraid to do anything about it; no one knew what happened within those dark walls. There were no small shops for provisions anywhere near, no itinerant vendor would go there to sell. Even the lowest laborer, or the poorest fisherman would seem as princes in comparison, for however poor, they would have at least

some honest livelihood whereas those who lived inside the gloom had no work, no means to pay, their only livelihood was derived from crime.

The problem of clearing this pit of inhumanity demanded a solution. Another building society of very wealthy bankers, considered the problem and decided that as the walls already stood, only a small expenditure would be necessary to make fruitful whatever capital was invested. The district, due to its ill-repute, would of course never become a fashionable quarter, therefore only small renovations were necessary to render it habitable for those people already so unfortunate. Regarding it thus as a business venture, they started with one building which they discovered would house a thousand people. They used some white-wash, put in some doors and windows, and laid in a few water pipes and drains.

It was estimated that in this area lived at least 10,000 people, therefore how could they discriminate which among them would be the best? They chose the married ones who by reason of their relation with one another would be the most human. As it happened there were only a very few children. It seems perhaps logical that under such conditions although there were thousands of men and women there should be only fifty children.

But these children, wild and uncivilized as they were, presented a serious problem of damage to the houses. Left alone while the parents went to work, they were free to carry out any wild fancy. So the director of the concern decided that the only obvious thing to keep them out of mischief was to collect all of the children and confine them.

One room was set aside for this purpose, resembling in every way a children's prison. It was hoped that a person would be found with enough social courage to tackle the problem.

I in my capacity of medical officer of hygiene was approached to take an interest in the work. Having considered the situation I demanded that at least the commonest aids in hygiene, food, and sanitation be made available.

At the time it had become fashionable among society ladies to interest themselves in social uplift. They were approached to do something to collect funds, because we were confronted with the strange problem that while the bankers had agreed to invest money to improve the housing situation, they were not at all interested in education. One could not expect any returns from money put into anything with an educational purpose.

Although society had embraced the ideal of improving the conditions of these unfortunate people, the children had been forgotten. There were no toys, no school, no teacher. I was able to find one woman of 40 years, whose help I asked and who I put in charge.

On the 6th of January 1907 this room was inaugurated to collect the 50 children. The room had already been in use some little time but it was inaugurated that day. Throughout Italy the 6th of January is looked upon as 'the' day of feast for the children. It was on this day that the Three Kings arrived before the Child Christ and offered him their gifts. It is celebrated as the Feast of Epiphany.

It was striking at the time this interest of society imbued with the idea that their giving hygienic houses to the homeless would be the means of purifying the evil core in their midst, consisting of a group of ten-thousand criminals and pitiful humanity. I also was imbued with this sentiment.

But while everyone had had the idea that by giving houses and sanitation, the people would be purified, no one had taken in consideration the children; no one had thought to bring toys or food for them. When the children, ranging between the ages of 2 to 6 entered, they were all dressed alike in some thick, heavy, blue drill. They were frightened and being hindered by the stiff material, could move neither arms nor legs freely. Apart of their own community they had never seen any people. To get them to move together they were made to hold hands. The first unwilling child was pulled, thus dragging along the whole line of the rest. All of them were crying miserably. The sympathy of the society ladies was aroused and they expressed the hope that in a few months they would improve.

I had been asked to make a speech for the occasion. Earlier that day, remembering that it was the Feast of the Epiphany, I had read the lesson in my mass book. When I made my speech I read it as an omen for the work to follow.

'Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold darkness shall cover the earth, and a mist the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall walk in thy light, and kings in the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see; all these are gathered together, they are come to thee; thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall rise up at thy side. Then shalt thou see, and abound and thy heart shall wonder and be enlarged, when the multitude of the sea shall be converted to thee, the strength of the Gentiles shall come to thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Madian and Epha; all they from Saba shall come, bringing gold and frankincense, and showing forth praise to the Lord.'

I don't know what came over me but I had a vision and inspired by it, I was enflamed and said that this work we were undertaking would prove to be very important and that someday people would come from all parts to see it.

In reporting this new whim of society, the press also mentioned that Dr. Montessori had made a beautiful speech, but what an exaggeration in what she had said!

It was from then that the real work began.

Remember that all these children were completely illiterate. Their parents were also illiterate and they were born and grown in the environment I have described.

What happened more than thirty years ago now, will always remain a mystery to me. I have tried since then to understand what took place in those children. Certainly there was nothing of what is to be found in any House of Children. There were only rough large tables.

I brought them some of the materials which had been used for our work in experimental psychology, the items which we use today as sensorial material and materials for the exercises of practical life. I merely wanted to study the children's reactions. I asked the woman in charge not to interfere with them in any way as otherwise I would not be able to observe them. Someone brought them paper and colored pencils but in itself this was not the explanation of the further events. There was no one who loved them, I myself only visited them once a week and during the day the children had no communication with their parents.

The children were quiet, they had no interference either from the teacher or from the parents, but their environment contrasted vividly from that which they had been used to; compared to that of their

previous life, it seemed fantastically beautiful. The walls were white, there was a green plot of grass outside, though no one had thought to plant flowers in it yet, but most beautiful of all was the fact that they had interesting occupation in which no one, no one at all, interfered. They were left alone and little by little the children began to work with concentration and the transformation they underwent, was noticeable. From timid and wild as they were before, the children became sociable and communicative. They showed a different relationship with each other, of which I have written in my books. Their personalities grew and, strange though it may seem, they showed extraordinary understanding, activity, vivacity, and confidence. They were happy and joyous.

This fact was noticed after a while by the mothers who came to tell us about it. As the children had had no one to teach them or interfere with their actions, they acted spontaneously, their manners were natural.

But the most outstanding thing about these children of the St. Lawrence Quarter was their obvious gratitude. I was as much surprised by this as everyone else. When I entered the room, all the children sprang to greet me and cried their welcome. Nobody had taught them any manner of good behavior. And the strangest thing of all was that although nobody had cared for them physically, they flourished in health as if they had been secretly fed on some nourishing food. And so they had, but in their spirit. These children began to notice things in their homes, a spot of dirt on their mother's dress, untidiness in the room. They told their mothers not to hang the washing in the windows but to put flowers there instead. Their influence spread into the homes, so that after a while also these became transformed.

Six months after the inauguration of the House of Children, some of the mothers came to me and pleaded that as I had already done so much for their children, and they themselves could do nothing about it because they were illiterate, would I not teach their children to read and write?

It cannot have come from an adult person; the thought, the very principle that the adult should stand aside to make room for the child, could never have come from the adult. Anyone who wants to follow my method must understand that he should not honor me but follow the child as his leader.