



TWO MARIAS, TWO GENERATIONS OF MONTESSORI COMMITMENT

INTRODUCTION

Maria Roth is a 3-6 AMI trainer of long standing: the mainstay of our affiliated Training Centre in Munich, Germany. While training many cohorts of international students, she also welcomed equally large numbers of toddlers in her own Casa. She has seen many developments in her own country, and in the global community and cherishes her Montessori legacy. In this interview she shares some very personal experiences that chart her own learning curves.

One of the best instances of her Montessori “success” is, of course, her youngest daughter Maria Schäf, to whom she passed her Montessori DNA. Maria Schäf has recently joined AMI’s Training of Trainers Programme, which she loves.

Maria Roth’s 50th anniversary in Montessori education certainly calls for a digital celebration: it is a perfect occasion to hear more from mother and daughter about their Montessori “bug”.



1986: Maria Roth holding baby Maria, one month old. Daughter Ursula is next to her. The lady in the middle is Mrs Margarete Aurin, student of Maria Montessori.



Maria Roth

-Congratulations are in order, we believe?

Yes, indeed. When I recently celebrated my 70th birthday, I realised that it also marked the fact that Montessori pedagogy has accompanied me for fifty years – throughout my life: I am a Montessori professional, but also prepared a Montessori home environment for my husband and daughters. And not to forget, all the lovely years spent with the Casa children.

-How did you discover Montessori education?

When I was a 17-year-old student in a convent school, I once met a young girl in one of the long corridors who wanted to ask me something. But silence was the rule, which meant I could not even utter a short “yes”. I felt so sorry for her! I blinked my eyes to indicate “yes”, which experience reinforced my wish to help create a world where there is genuine communication between adults and children.

I decided to do the state training for kindergarten teachers. During my internship, 12 children would sit around the table in silence with their hands on the table - no movement for hours! These 3-6-year-olds were sometimes allowed to play with building blocks at the table or look at a picture book. Altogether there were 60 children in the room with one teacher and an intern, who had to carry out exactly what the lead teacher instructed her to do, which included slapping the children's hands should they pull them away from the table.

I could relate to this experience: in school my hands were slapped when I tried to help the classmate sitting next to me. I was convinced that this kind punishment definitely did not contribute to fostering real knowledge. The experience did not do much for my appreciation of the system.

I got my diploma as a state educator at the age of 19, during which time we as students heard positive things about Froebel. One of our teachers remarked that the name "Montessori" must also be mentioned, although that "was not a good thing as the children are only allowed to do what the teacher shows." (sic) We were shown how to build the Pink tower and put it back - without words, and also were given a brief introduction to the Brown stairs and the colour tablets box 1, also without words. I was amazed.

I desperately wanted to find out more about Montessori, but our course did not offer any more than those brief presentations, and I was puzzled why they didn't. But my Montessori moment came when a year later a Montessori workshop was offered in Munich, the town where I was working.

I was amazed to learn from the speaker, going strong at 70 at a time when many women retired at the age of 60, that she could not explain Montessori to us in one evening. We'd have to come to the course every Friday and Saturday for over a year. Oh god, I wanted to go dancing these two days and enjoy life.

I was occasionally puzzled by the lessons and asked myself simple questions such as why did I have to learn to spoon and pour? Anyone can do this! And dry out the bucket, open and close the door? Had I paid my tuition fees for that? Certainly, there must be a secret behind it. I persisted, I wanted the answer and got it.

The highlights of my course were visits by Mario Montessori, accompanied by his wife Ada, who also spoke German. Each of us was given ample time to engage with them, and no question was ever too much to answer. Their passion for children shone through.



First AMI Course Munich 1970-1971.

VISITS BY MARIO

Later on, Mario Montessori would visit my Casa group with abled and differently-abled children and would ask pertinent questions on the use of the materials in my environment. Sometimes I changed the presentation a little, such as holding the sound cylinder, as children with co-ordination difficulties in their hands always muffled the sound. I pointed my thumb to the bottom of the sound cylinder and my middle finger to the lid so the child could hear the sounds. Mario gave me a lot of feedback and useful ideas. He would first observe, listen, and then offer some advice.

One day Mario completely bowled me over by saying I should study in the US in preparation for becoming an AMI trainer and after my initial hesitation I realised the great honour and trust he was showing. Just to clarify for today's readers, AMI did not yet run the Training of Trainers Programme at that stage.

I was excited to be involved in the founding of the AMI Course for Special Education in Munich 1976/77. For us it was clear that the teachers first needed to complete the "ordinary" AMI diploma course before learning about the needs of children with multiple challenges. I hold particularly dear memories of Mrs Margarete Aurin, a student of Maria Montessori and Mario Montessori, with whom I shared many discussions. Through Mrs Aurin I got to know other former students of Maria Montessori's, such as Margot Waltuch, Lilian Bryan, Augusto Grosso, Nancy Jordan, Maria Antonietta Paolini, Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro, Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi — all of whom I hold in great esteem.

I loved Mario's motto: "we try and if it is good, we keep it and if not, we think again."

Over the years until today, the application of Montessori education has enabled the realisation of social integration or, as it is called today, inclusion. Each child was seen in its totality, and a specialist team discussed how each individual child could be supported in the best way in helping them build their own personality with the involvement of the parents.

I am grateful for the years spent with Prof. Hellbrügge, who founded several non profit organisations to run the Munich Children's Center as it is known today, championing the integration of children who live with multiple challenges.

-What did you find the most touching, revolutionary during your own training?

During my own training a full appreciation grew of what Mario had once said: "understand in depth". Sometimes, when I did not grasp a concept sufficiently and thought to solve it by bringing in extra material, Mario encouraged me to "understand better, understand in depth". While it took me aback a little at the time, it has remained one of the most inspirational bits of advice I ever received.

Revolutionary – Many think that Montessori materials are too scientific, and that children need to engage in conventional imaginative play up to the age of six. During my training in the USA, I experienced a Montessori group set-up with only Montessori materials for the first time. Before, I could not imagine that Montessori language would really work but I had to blame my own hesitancy, still going on what traditional education had impressed on us, that writing, and reading should not be offered to children before they are six or seven. Since that time, I continue to be delighted to see very young children engaged in writing and reading.


-Can you describe a few instances where you think Montessori education really was able to make a difference during your many years of working in Montessori?

The interest in Montessori education grew in my country, also because those three letters AMI represented international quality and that gave security.

Throughout the years we had to overcome many challenges in Germany where the authorities gave off conflicting signals: the most paradoxical one was that Professor Hellbrügge received a presidential honour, whilst at the same time the regional state was ready to impose a fine on him for opening a Montessori school for which they were not ready to grant permission.

I have always continued to lobby for recognition of our Montessori courses in the state of Bavaria in Germany, where each state is responsible for the education that is offered and recognised. It took me ages to be received by the city of Munich and the Ministry of Education and fully explain what AMI Montessori is all about and was finally heard.

Preparing the climate for a full understanding of Montessori principles is part of the articles of association of AMI, and this remains something that drives my work and conversations, for example when I have to explain why Germany needs AMI when there is also a regional society? Or when people think they can look up all Montessori knowledge on Wikipedia! So, my mission is that we need to train more teachers, which will lead to more parents being able to get to know this wonderful pedagogy for their child. All the same, preparing the minds of the authorities continues to take time.

A close-up photograph of a child's hand holding a small white daisy flower. The background is a soft-focus green field of grass with several other daisies. The lighting is natural, suggesting an outdoor setting.

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THE MOST WONDERFUL
EXPERIENCE AND PROFOUND
KNOWLEDGE, WHICH THROUGH
ITS EXCEPTIONAL VALUES
ASPIRES TO CONTRIBUTE TO
WORLD PEACE. THROUGH AMI
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MARIA MONTESSORI.**

-MARIA SCHÄF

-You have really grown the Montessori presence, developed new initiatives and been a stable Montessori factor in your country. What are your wishes for the future, and where do you continue to take your inspiration from?

My hope is that Montessori education continues to be taught true to the original Montessori ideas. A hundred years on, they are not old-fashioned, because Montessori's ideas are based on the natural learning abilities of every child, indeed on scientific knowledge. The laws of nature do not change. We only have to learn to understand.

I hope that ever more people are able to obtain some basic knowledge about Montessori.

The best route is when parents influence society and politics through the Montessori experiences of their children.

Today there are few people left who personally knew Maria Montessori or Mario Montessori.

I would love it if these people would record their experiences for us and future generations.

Today the books are the main source of knowledge, and it is good that there are more and more English-language books, and yet it is still very important to translate them into the different national languages. For me, it is important that they are largely the same, especially if you offer multilingual classes. Multilingual work in the courses is important. Montessori principles are applicable in every country and we grow together.

I am inspired whenever I observe the people around me, and I continue to be fascinated by the movements and development of children. I love to have conversations with the children, but also with parents, my students, my colleagues, my family.

I am grateful to AMI for all the support and deep conversations, their extraordinary resources, both print and digital. I would like to thank all who helped me to gain a profound understanding of the Montessori principles.

My older daughter Ursula has the AMI diploma, and uses her Montessori knowledge with her own family. My youngest daughter Maria has shared so many experiences with me and is continuing the Montessori work, with AMI.





Maria Schäf

-We expect all of your young years were also about Montessori education? How did you experience a home environment according to the Montessori principles? And how were your Casa days?

Yes, I grew up with Montessori education from day one. I came home directly from the hospital and the Casa children welcomed me home. Our Montessori Casa is on the first floor of our home, so it has always been a part of our family life. Because the Casa was so seamlessly integrated into our lives, the values of Montessori education were always lived in our family. The independence, but also the cultural acceptance, as well our humanity was lived. I spent every free minute in the Casa. After school hours, I went first to the Casa and even during my own vacation I was there supporting the children

as well as the staff. I helped prepare the environment (inside and outside) along with taking the role of observing the needs of the others and to act accordingly. The Casa was not a place of learning for me; I lived there.

-Did your Montessori education stand you in good stead when you went to secondary school? What benefitted you most from your Montessori education?

In our home, including our Casa and the people around us (children and parents), I was always accepted for who I was. This is one of the major characteristics and core values of Montessori education. When I went to elementary school, I quickly realized that in the public system you have to fit into a system, and I sometimes found it hard to adapt.

There was no room for individuality. Anyone who thought independently, or asked questions did not fit into the system. That's why I always liked to go home to "my Casa" where in my "ideal world" I could find balance again.

-When did you catch the Montessori "bug" – wishing to go into education yourself? Was it a very natural development, or did you do something else first?

After my school years, it was my turn to decide on a career. In Germany, this happens around the age of 16. Everyone knows that this decision falls exactly in puberty. And what does a young adolescent girl decide? This one wanted to become a make-up artist. I followed the necessary training, but when it came to practising the profession, I quickly realized that it was all about appearances and the person themselves is not seen. Only a facade is built up, it is all about pretense. When taking time off to reconsider my professional future, I was happy to go back to "my Casa" and wished to continue on this path. It then followed I wanted to pursue a professional career in Montessori.

-Can you tell us a bit about your experience on the Training of Trainers programme? What do you find challenging and what do you find rewarding?

The Montessori centre where my mother gave and still gives the AMI courses was a space for deepening Montessori knowledge.

There was always an exchange of ideas and questions with her students, who I also observed practising with the materials.

Here I was able to learn how to deal with adults who have no prior knowledge of Montessori education.

Every free minute I spent in this environment. I was allowed to be a "child" during the presentations and help in the background with the organization around the time of the exams (offering drinks, organizing food, decorating flowers on the table...). The exchange with the trainers from other countries was exciting.

Since I felt very comfortable and accepted here, the decision to travel the Montessori route always seemed obvious. The way to get there was a bit complicated, as traditional teacher training in Germany is not offered at university level. This meant that for some time I was not eligible to join the Training of Trainers Programme that requires a university degree. When AMI changed its admission requirements to a Bachelor's or equivalent, it opened the door for me to apply.

I am very happy that nowadays there are different formats that allow trainees to go through the Training of Trainers Programme, enabling people with young families to join. The seminar formats make it possible to get to know your fellow trainees from all those different countries and be able to exchange experiences. Since I am now doing my training in the Corona period, I have also been able to see how we exchange experiences via digital media. All the same, I am very much hoping that the transfer of Montessori knowledge will hopefully take place in person again in the future. To my mind we very much need real contact with people, not only for the learning process but also for developing all other skills.



-What are your hopes for Montessori education for the future? In your own country? In the rest of the world?

I am very happy to be part of the future German-speaking group of AMI trainers. In our language area (Germany, Switzerland and Austria) there will be three new trainers in the short term. I am looking forward to working with the other trainers, as this means that AMI Montessori education can be represented more strongly in our countries.

In our language area we see national Montessori courses offered by organisations that enjoy an affiliation with AMI – which situation can be confusing to people new to Montessori and orientating themselves on the Montessori landscape. I hope that with my new colleagues we can effectively promote AMI training nationwide, as I feel AMI's legacy offers the most wonderful experience and profound knowledge, which through its exceptional values aspires to contribute to world peace. Through AMI and their commitment to children's rights and peace, we truly connect to Maria Montessori.