



The Christmas Lantern, designed and made by Uwe Jacquet

Lighting up the darkness. UWE JACQUET, a pioneer of Waldorf education

By Sven Saar, December 2011

As the days grow shorter and the light gives way to darkness they appear again: colourful Christmas lanterns that silently turn on nature tables. The angel flies by, radiating bright light, followed by the star that is surrounded by darkest blue. Below these heavenly movements we see archetypal Christmas images, standing still: Mary in the forest of thorns, the manger, the shepherds' proclamation, the kings following the star, the flight to Egypt.

The light that shines through the slits in the roof of the lantern and the dancing shadows on the walls lend enchantment to the room. The family cat sits for hours, watching, entranced by the dancing light. Children wait eagerly for the angel to reappear and adults delight in the gentle play of colours and the magical advent mood.

Have you ever seen one of these lanterns? In Germany maybe: in or around Stuttgart or at Lake Constance? Or more likely in England. They can be found in over 5000 houses and institutions all over the world. It was the cosmopolitan Uwe Jacquet who invented and developed the lanterns. Born in Saxony, Uwe fled to the West as a child after the war. Although his father had been a founding teacher at the Waldorf School in Dresden Uwe was unable to attend it, since he had hardly reached school age when it was closed by the Nazis (the last of the German Waldorf schools to suffer that fate). It had hardly opened again after the war when it was closed for the second time by the occupying Soviet forces. In fact, the war ensured that Uwe missed out on a large part of his schooling altogether.

He (mis-)spent his teenage years in various places and Waldorf schools in the south of Germany. His siblings also went on to find their place in the Waldorf world: the name "Jacquet" is well known in schools from Southern Germany up to the Ruhr area.

After scraping a living as a tour guide in Paris Uwe became involved, at the age of twenty, in the founding of the Chatou Waldorf School in France. It was here where, inspired by the famous East German Christmas pyramids, he first thought of building a Christmas lantern. He married and after his first two daughters were born the young family moved to Sussex in England to live and work – for many years as it turned out – at Michael Hall, now the oldest

and biggest of the British Waldorf schools. Uwe started as a French teacher, later he also taught German and finally embarked on his career as arts and crafts teacher.

When I started teaching in the late 1980s there were still quite a few teachers like the Jacquets: a generation deeply rooted in anthroposophy, selfless and devoted to their schools, approaching all areas of life with artistic awareness. Apart from bringing up their own children (Uwe and H el ene Jacquet have four) and teaching fulltime, members of that generation tended to work ceaselessly, visibly as well as behind the scenes of their schools: they would design, build and paint makeshift huts to serve as classrooms, build cupboards and shelves, and help with the planning and erecting of new school buildings. They organized school fairs, planned yearly festivals, worked in young colleagues, introduced parents and the public to the education, and founded kindergartens and teacher trainings. Throughout their lives the Jacquets took a close, almost proprietorial interest in the Oberufer plays, directing and playing many parts. Helene edited and published what is now the definitive English edition of the plays.

We all still benefit from their work; without them our schools could not be what they are today. Much has changed in recent decades, partly because old traditions are justifiably being called into question and broken up. But it is to these pioneers that Waldorf education owes its solidity and good reputation. They joined their lives and destinies inseparably to that of the movement.

Uwe Jacquet began his work at Michael Hall in 1963. All upper school students went through his highly competent teaching, taking with them, as reminders for life, copper candle holders and bowls, iron pokers, even self-moulded silver rings. Uwe spent much of his free time in his workshop and at the annual Christmas fair his stall was one of the most beautiful and profitable. The most charming Christmas presents could be bought there: household articles made of metal, jewellery, transparencies, straw stars and wooden toys. All proceeds went to the school, of course.

The first lantern was built from paper, cardboard, wire and wood and operated by a candle. For half an hour it delighted the entire family before the candle tilted and set the whole contraption alight. Uwe kept improving the design of the lantern over the next years. The production process started in the autumn, with the Jacquets, parents and children, sitting around the kitchen table cutting out beautiful motifs and bringing them to life with layers of coloured tissue paper. The individual pictures were then assembled to form the lanterns which were also sold at the Christmas fair. The school greatly benefitted from the stunning lanterns, also later when the candles were long replaced by electric light bulbs and the lanterns were no longer made of cardboard but of more durable plastic.

In the 1980s demand for the lantern grew so fast that Uwe decided to have various components industrially prefabricated. These parts can be easily assembled and the finished lanterns, while no longer completely unique, have all the aesthetic properties of the original. Today, they can be found in thousands of houses, flats, medical centres and shops where they belong to Christmas just like holly, ivy and mince pies. Lantern kits can be bought and they come with detailed instructions for assembly. Schools can purchase them at a reduced price if they want to use them for fundraising. Uwe still makes several dozen unique lanterns every year, using the original cut outs and tissue paper.

He taught me his technique too. When I was a class teacher at Michael Hall we decided to teach pupils from a certain age how to make the lanterns. I have done this twice successfully, in two-week main lessons, once with a class seven and once with a class eight. The "Lantern Main Lesson" has become part of the class eight curriculum at Michael Hall. The pupils tend

to be sceptical at first, doubtful that they can manage the fine filigree work with a cutting mat and a scalpel. They quickly gain confidence, however, after the first attempts and end up astounded at the beautiful pictures they produce. They can also bring in their own ideas: a Jewish pupil who did not want to use images from the Christmas story designed Hanukkah motifs for her lantern. Pupils in Basel and Prien in Southern Germany have by now successfully built the lanterns, for their own use and for sale at their Christmas markets. Uwe is open to requests from interested schools. He is also actively looking out for a successor to take on his beautiful craft and continue to build the lanterns in the future when he will no longer be able to do so.

The Jacquets have moved back to Paris where they live close to the Verrières Waldorf school. This is also part of that generation's destiny: we younger ones often find it difficult not to appear ungrateful in our striving for modernization. Such deserving colleagues should be able to live and be active around their schools, to be school grandparents as it were.

Waldorf teachers such as the Jacquets, who bring an artistic approach to everything they do, can greatly inspire us younger teachers. Their thoroughness, their love for detail and devotion to the true goals of Waldorf education stand before us like the radiant, colourful light of the Christmas lantern.

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(Translated from the German by Margot M. Saar)