

## From Around the World

# Waldorf Education in Russia

*The Friends of Waldorf Education (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners) is an organization based in Germany that supports and promotes Waldorf Education around the world, particularly in countries outside Europe and North America. Its autumn 2007 Rundbrief, or newsletter, contained four reports from Russia about Waldorf Education in that country. This article is a conflation of material taken from those four reports.*

—R. E. K.

Though bereft of its Soviet-era empire, Russia is still the largest nation in the world—in territory—and one of the largest in population, with about 200 million citizens. Also, because of Russia's vast energy reserves and military might, it is a global power. This vast land stretches from the borders of eastern Europe across the Eurasian landmass some 6000 miles to the Pacific Ocean. The city of Vladivostok is almost directly north of Seoul, Korea.

### The Moscow Waldorf School

The first Waldorf school in Russia was the Moscow Waldorf School, also known as School Number 1060. Its history began in 1989 with the forming of "Aristotel," a tiny preschool initiative founded by people interested in Waldorf Education. Prior to that time, Anthroposophy, as a spiritually based worldview, along with its daughter movements, including Waldorf Education, was emphatically proscribed by the communist regime. In that same year, also in response to the loosening of government controls, a Waldorf teacher training began. Twenty-five persons, most but not all of them teachers, suspended their careers and entered the two-year program.

By autumn 1992, the children and teachers were able to move into a five-story building in the center of Moscow. The building, on a small plot of land, had been transformed from a half-ruin through generous financial aid from Germany. Soon, however, because of skyrocketing expenses, the school was in a fight for survival. It had to decide if it wanted, like most independent schools in Russia, to become an elite school with high tuition rates. The school decided against this, and in 1996 registered as a state school. Since then the Moscow Waldorf School has been supported financially by the central government. School founder and director, Anatoly Pinsky, was able to retain the basic elements of Waldorf Education, develop unencumbered artistic and musical activities, and introduce eurythmy into all classes.

From the beginning, the school worked openly and cooperatively with the broader educational community. The school now is well-known and respected

both in Moscow and throughout Russia. It has successfully used advertising with slogans such as "We are building the school of the future." The school has also developed an effective and widely accepted way of evaluating student performance based on a "school portfolio."

The Moscow school has sought to adapt the curriculum to modern needs without sacrificing the essentials of Waldorf Education. The aspects of its curriculum that distinguish the

school from mainstream schools in Russia include:

- Practical, hands-on learning that goes from handwork in the early grades through to the major craft projects of the graduating seniors. These classes stretch the resources of the school but are considered worth it.



*First graders at the Moscow Waldorf School try out their C-flutes.*



*Second graders taking part in a festival pageant*

- A strong music program beginning in the early grades. In addition to regular classes in music, there are afternoon classes in musical theatre, orchestra, ensemble playing, world musical culture, and choir.
- An established tradition of theatrical productions in all grades.
- Specialized instruction. From the eighth grade, the students choose particular topics and projects on which to spend a certain amount of time each week.
- Class trips and working practicums for high school students.

In 2006 the central government invited schools and individual teachers to present their curriculum ideas in a nationwide contest. The Moscow Waldorf School did so and won a prize of one million rubles (about US\$30,000) for its entry.

Today the Moscow school has over 300 students in eleven grades. There is no twelfth grade in Russian high schools. That is a year given over to military service. Despite the sudden death of Anatoly Pinsky in 2006, the Waldorf school enjoys stability and a positive attitude toward the future.

### **The Broader National Movement**

The strong wave of interest, sympathy, and even infatuation with Waldorf Education that began with the founding of the Moscow school continued through the 1990s. A number of other schools were

opened, including the school in Saint Petersburg (in 1994). Today there are about twenty Waldorf schools in Russia. Most of the schools are small, and only one-third of them receive state support. The majority of the roughly 2000 Waldorf students in Russia attend the five largest schools—those in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Samara, Smolensk, and in the Siberian city of Irkutsk.

The early period of optimism and expansion has given way to a period of serious challenges and some contraction. While the larger state-supported schools are doing well, a couple of the smaller, non-state schools have closed down, and others have lost enrollment.

Today certain challenges affect most or all of the Waldorf schools in Russia. These include:

- **Government regulations:** The central government has issued two sets of requirements, which all schools must fulfill. One has to do with the subjects to be covered in the curriculum. The other stipulates how many hours should be allotted to each subject. For example, the hours permitted for handwork and the arts are very small. Waldorf schools have had to work hard and to make compromises in order to fit their curriculums into this Procrustean bed. The trend is toward more stringent rules and tighter controls.



*Ninth graders in a performance of a play by Russian playwright Nikolai Gogol*

- **High costs:** Rents and other basic expenses are very high in Russia. Only one of the Waldorf schools owns its own building; the others pay exorbitant and constantly rising rents. Several schools have been forced to move to inconvenient locations and as a result have lost students.
- **High tuition rates:** High expenses result, of course, in high tuition costs for parents, at least in the independent schools. Tuition fees range from about US\$300 a month to US\$800, even the lower amount being beyond the reach of most middle class families.
- **Low teacher salaries:** Teacher salaries range from US\$200 to US\$700 per month, which is not really adequate to support a family. Consequently, almost all the teachers are women—some schools do not have even one male teacher—and most of these women are married to a man with a good job or are supported by their own parents. Some teachers are single mothers who somehow make do at the poverty level. Many Waldorf teachers survive by working outside the school, for example, giving private lessons, doing translating, or making toys or furniture.

Government regulations, high costs, high tuition, low salaries—the Russian schools seem to have the same problems as Waldorf schools in many other countries. The challenges may in fact be particularly severe in Russia: the salaries are so low that teachers sometimes can't even pay their monthly rent.

The Waldorf schools in Russia are located at great distances from one another, and their financial resources are small. They exist under varying conditions and with various special challenges. Nevertheless, the schools are working together to overcome their shared problems. The twenty Waldorf schools and initiatives have organized themselves into an Association of Waldorf Schools of Russia. Recently this group was involved in the drafting of a general Waldorf curriculum that fulfills the requirements of the national educational standards. In addition, administrators from member schools have been working on legal and economic aspects of school administration. They have exchanged experiences related to the preparation of important documents and types of permission required by the government and also discussed questions of development. Two teachers from the member school in Samara are working to produce a CD-ROM on the Waldorf curriculum and pedagogy, which will be made available to all schools.



*High school students in a performance of eurythmy*

The Association also provides a forum in which important questions can be discussed:

- What are the necessary elements in a Waldorf school?
- What constitutes a Waldorf teacher training?
- How can good teachers be retained?
- What is the role of parents in Waldorf Education?
- What is the relationship of Anthroposophy to Waldorf Education?
- How can a school create a positive relationship to the rest of the community?

In January 2008, the second conference of Waldorf teachers in Russia was held in Saint Petersburg on the theme “Waldorf Education in the Russian Context: From the Idea to the Realization.” Gradually, a group of experienced teachers is emerging who can carry the teacher training work.

The seeds of Waldorf Education have been planted in the not always welcoming Russian soil. The difficult financial and legal situation requires the mobilization of inner forces and also the building of bridges to what is good and rich in the broader educational environment. Waldorf schools in Russia appreciate opportunities for cooperation with Waldorf schools in other parts of the world. ☺

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## Resources

Persons interested in student and/or teacher exchanges with Russian schools should write to [freunde.waldorf@t-online.de](mailto:freunde.waldorf@t-online.de) Persons interested in volunteer opportunities in Waldorf schools in Russia should write to [freundekarlsruhe@t-online.de](mailto:freundekarlsruhe@t-online.de)