

## « Friends of the Child and the Family » in Isfahan

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20 October 2017. A minibus drives through the dark night of the desert landscape between Tehran and Isfahan, filled with luggage and teaching materials for Waldorf courses. At three in the morning, the young driver drops us in front of an old house turned into a hotel in a narrow alley among white-washed houses of the old city of Isfahan.

The next evening: a big welcome celebration in the new Waldorf kindergarten initiative „Sohrewardi“ in the southeast of Isfahan. In attendance were members of the Isfahan Friends of the Child and the Family association, well-known personalities in the city, officials, dignitaries, members of the parent association, a student at the college of arts and crafts, and economic and cultural leaders. The guests from Germany (Pia Weische Alexa, Astrid Baumgarten and myself) were introduced to the circle, who wished the initiative well and offered their support. After greetings and thanks, we were asked questions about Waldorf education. The young students were very interested in the exchange and described their unsatisfactory situations in the universities and the absence of intergenerational dialogue. Lots of hope, and lots of expectations!



On the next day, the festive opening of the introductory course in Waldorf education took place, with introductory remarks by the college director, Dr. Moschkelani, and the founder and initiator of the project, Mrs. Sajjadi. I then spoke to the question, “Why Waldorf education in Iran?” The topics presented in the course ranged from “What are Anthroposophy and Waldorf Education about?” to “Developmental Phases of the Child”, “The Effects of Pictures, Stories, and Fairy Tales” and a workshop on communication.

The lunch breaks offered plenty of time for conversations and making contacts. Those who had travelled from other cities presented their own institutes and programs that were active on behalf of children and families, and invited participants to attend courses in their regions. There were many interesting people who demonstrated enthusiasm for the various topics and aspects of Waldorf education!

Representatives from various institutes in Tehran were also present. Leila Alemi, an Iranian who had studied in the USA, described her work with a small circle of educators who meet regularly to exchange views on Waldorf Education. In the summer of 2017 she organized the first workshop in Tehran on eurythmy and early childhood education.

The last day of the course was a particular challenge. Participants included doctors, psychologists, university lecturers from three different universities, and prominent politicians. Among them were the decision-makers on whether Waldorf Education could be useful for Iran. There were professional conversations and



expressions of appreciation that the course was a successful beginning for new perspectives in the country, above all for the 400 participants.

The lecturers worked around the clock for six days (including evening conversations in the hotel for review and planning) and wanted to do our best so that the participants coming from all over Iran would be as satisfied as possible.

### **Background History**

All this was prepared over a period of 10 years. Through regular contact with educators in our circle of friends, I had become aware in 2006 that a conference introducing Waldorf education was planned to take place in Tehran. The Koodakane Donja Research Institute, which had already hosted three conferences on alternative education, decided to host a fourth conference. In February 2008 three of us - Doris Waskow (at that time the director of the Cologne Waldorf Kindergarten), Pia Weische Alexa (lecturer on Anthroposophy and early childhood development) and I went to Tehran and held the first Waldorf education conference in the history of Iran, attended by several hundred participants from various educational approaches. In addition to us, there was also Iranian lecturer Ms. Sajjadi (who at that time was a kindergarten director in Isfahan and who later took courses at the Cologne Kindergarten Seminar).

A second trip to Iran followed in October 2008, this time with Peter Lang (at that time director of the Waldorf Kindergarten Seminar in Stuttgart and board member in the Baden Württemberg Waldorf Kindergarten Association) in order to see how things might go forward. Fifteen Iranian kindergarten teachers and class teachers were then invited to come to Cologne, through the enthusiastic support of Pia Weische Alexa and the Cologne Seminar.

After this professional development course, requests came from individual participants, but there were no further official invitations. We did hear news from time to time that here and there schools and kindergartens were trying to incorporate aspects of Waldorf education.

In spring 2017, I went to Teheran and came into conversation with teacher and school book author Shafigheh Safarian. She showed great interest in founding her own school with a Waldorf educational approach. Once again I contacted Ms. Weische Alexa, with whom I had stayed in touch over the years. The main question was whether a philosophically-based pedagogy was feasible in an Islamic country. We discussed the Iranian world view -- on the one hand from the perspective of Zoroastrianism, still living in Iranian culture through festivals and rituals, as for example at the spring equinox which is still an official New Year's festival in Iran and the winter solstice, another festival that is still widely celebrated -- and on the other hand in relation to Islamic philosophy as viewed through Anthroposophy.





Plans grew more concrete through the request of Ms. Sajjadi, who wanted to organize an introductory course in her pilot project, “the Center for the Well Being of the Child and the Family,” and who needed lecturers. In addition to a kindergarten, the project plan also includes child care, a primary school and an upper school.

And so in the summer of 2017 I flew to Isfahan, in order to have preliminary conversations for a seminar in October 2017. Among other things, we also spoke about the naming of the center, which now carries the name Sohrewardi, the Iranian philosopher from the 12th century.

### **A view to the future**

The Center in Isfahan and its many helpers have now set a goal to become a training center for Waldorf education. Events are to be organized and literature translated. The Sohrewardi Center sees itself as capable of providing the infrastructure for such an undertaking and becoming the legal carrier of a training institution in Iran. The Seminar for Waldorf Pedagogy in Cologne, as an independent educational institution in the Rhineland region of Germany, has offered a great deal of support thus far. Initiatives and educational approaches without a proper basis could have disastrous consequences, and for this reason the Association of Waldorf Initiatives in Iran is so important.

At the beginning of February 2018 there will be a multi-regional meeting in Iran. The Koodakane Donja Research Institute in Tehran will invite educators and directors from throughout Iran who are interested in Waldorf education. On our next-to-last day in Tehran, we visited Mr. Yusofi, the director of the Donja Institute. We will prepare a second seminar in Isfahan for further training of educators.

We are actively seeking cooperation partners for the further development of the project. We need long-term partnerships in order to implement Waldorf education and to train and mentor educators in Iran.

In addition, a school, advisory centers, a therapeutic center and introductory courses in emergency pedagogy, and finally a college for arts, crafts and economics are to expand the project.

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*Bahardocht Naderi Tabrizi grew up in Tehran, studied sociology in Berlin, and completed a supplementary Waldorf training course in Cologne.*