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Emil Molt and the Waldorf School at Stuttgart

By *Rudolf Grosse*

(From *Erlebte Pädagogik* (Experienced Pedagogy), Dornach 1968)

The Waldorf School at Stuttgart (Freie Waldorfschule) was founded in 1919 by Dr. Emil Molt, General Manager of the Waldorf-Astoria Cigarette Factory, for the children of his workmen. This was a social impulse and an action born out of the free life of the spirit.

While I stayed in his house for two and a half years, Emil Molt frequently told me of that time which had been the climax of his life.

In September 1919, when the School was opened, the 260 pupils were mainly children of proletarians, and some were children of Anthroposophists. Emil Molt had asked Rudolf Steiner to take over the School's organization and guidance. Under his lead, the School obtained that spiritual foundation which became known as an education born out of Anthroposophy. An individual initiative thus led to the movement known as "Rudolf Steiner" or "Waldorf Pedagogy", which has become a leading factor in the spiritual life of the 20th century.

Emil Molt was an extremely interesting person. His small, square, corpulent figure, with the beautifully shaped, large and bald head, revealed a man with a strong will. His small blue eyes were vivid and had an intelligent, penetrating and energetic look. His large mouth with thin lips and a strong chin, gave the very attractive face a marked note. He was exactly 42 years old, when he called the Waldorf School into life. His spiritual size appears sufficiently through the fact that he possessed in these still youthful years the wide outlook enabling him to offer, at a time of revolution, collapse, and a helpless search for new directions, a contribution from the world of economic enterprise, by founding the Waldorf School, which led - through Rudolf Steiner - to a renewal of the schools and education. He entered history not as manager of a cigarette factory, but as the founder of a school.

Emil Molt, who died at Stuttgart in 1936, soon after his sixtieth year, had to pass through

a hard youth. Born on the 14th April 1876 at Schwäbisch-Gmünd, he experienced in his own destiny the oppression of a tormenting school-life. Already an orphan at fourteen, he was apprenticed to an esteemed commercial firm at Calw, a business with a rich assortment of goods for the many requirements of a rural population. He often told me of his difficult, hard time as an apprentice, valuable as a schooling just because it was so hard, and he - the smallest and youngest - was exposed to the freaks and whims of the older boys. He had to work in the storage room, carry heavy sacks; cases and other burdens on his weak shoulders, begin the day when it was still dark and finish late. The shops were open even on Sunday, so that he could never enjoy spare time or holidays. "How it filled me with longing to see my comrades going to a higher grade school, to watch them sometimes at their games, or when they were sitting together or wandering, and to be excluded from their life." Nevertheless he greatly revered his chief, old Georgi, a model of discipline, commercial honesty and blamelessness, whom he sought to imitate. A rare word of praise gave him the feeling of being in Paradise and it was the highest reward one could expect. This Spartan way became to some extent also Emil Molt's way, visible in many traits of his character, even when, later on, he had to adopt a completely different style of life. When he sometimes invited business friends to lunch, he did not seem to notice that the very plain vegetarian meal appeared to them "unusual". The after-lunch meetings in his library confused them still more, for his large and valuable collection of books gave the impression of being the room of a man of learning, rarely to be found among the captains of economic life.

Emil Molt's chief sent him to Greece when he was a young businessman, so that he might learn to know world-trade in a large import and export firm. This sojourn in the Balkans brought the strong-willed Svabian, whose character had been formed in early years by the call of duty and a hard life, face to face with a new life element, which did him good, and conjured up his great forces of enthusiasm, his joy of living and his love of mankind. In this region of Europe he clearly stood upon the ground of his destiny, and he often tried to unriddle the connections with his subsequent life, which led him to the South again and again. All the elements of a spiritual seeker, with the innate "Know thyself", lived in him instinctively and led him, while he was still a young man, to Rudolf Steiner. This meeting called up into consciousness what had formerly worked in him in a more dormant state. Remarkable are the sentences he wrote himself, concerning his encounter with Anthroposophy:

" . . . At that time, active men felt ashamed and blushed when one spoke of the soul as something real. Their whole will and action, generally concealing their inner restlessness, turned towards outer events. In this frame of mind I came across Dr. Steiner's first lectures, to which a business-friend had called my attention. Strange seemed to me at first this world of ideas and it was difficult to grasp its contents. Too great was the contrast with the so far existing train of thoughts. Thought-concentration appealed most of all to the practical businessman. It could be applied to life and tested, and roused my confidence in a spiritual direction which rendered men - and this could be proved - more efficient and capable. Gradually I began to grasp also the contents. Inner calmness and concentration appeared, to begin with, during the lectures, and for the first time the experience of unshakableness came over me, even though it lasted only a few moments, a

kind of feeling that the whole world might crash - but that this would not affect you. With elemental force I felt the desire that such an experience might not be an exceptional condition, but a lasting one! This desire led me to Rudolf Steiner. This meeting was a turning point in my life. Outwardly, it did not at first appear in an evident form. To be sure, alcohol and meat were thrown overboard, because they hindered a serious thought - training. There was hardly any change in daily business life. But there remained sufficient time and interest also for questions which were not directly concerned merely with business. A serious study of Steiner's literature brought order into one's own life of thinking and feeling. Only now I began to notice its chaotic state. How the true human essence had been submerged and lost in all that outer confusion! I gradually rediscovered it through hard inner work, and then I realized with a shock how little I had known so far of this man within man! Once laid bare with greatest effort - an annoyance or a vexation sufficed to cover him up again. What an endless work to begin anew, again and again! I found out how one's own character and temperament blocked the way and how one had to overcome them ever anew. But fighting steels inside and outside - and many a success in outer life could be traced back to this inner struggling. One began to learn how to cope with life.

“The intercourse with Dr. Steiner and the study of his books influenced most deeply the moral side. Even small things began to change. To be a business man and to write letters in keeping with truth, is often thought to be impossible - Mercury's rules admit a little swindling -, indeed, to avoid it, is even not quite in accordance with the business code. These traditions were discarded. They were replaced by the striving for absolute truthfulness even in small and conventional things - and it was alike in small and big things. This truthfulness had been roused, it became a life-necessity. Confidence streaming from all directions, even from the bank-sphere, was the natural outcome.

“Again we see that it was man's whole being that had thus been grasped, and since he was at the same time wholly practical, and things kept on improving, he also penetrated in an ever more encompassing way into his business enterprises.

“A commercial outlook, which remained clear, without being darkened by momentary moods, was the result of thought-training; the life of feeling changed into equanimity and inner calmness; the volitional disposition unfolded to moral responsibility.

“Rudolf Steiner's “Appeal to the German Nation and the Civilized World” (1919) struck a disciplined soulmood. Need it surprise that I felt quite at one with its contents and that it was an obvious duty for me to stand up for it in the fullest measure? Living within me as a seed, I merely had to realize what gradually came to the fore through the study of the *Kernpunkte* (Fundamental Points). The threefold structure of the social organism as a political, economic and spiritual life, in all three of which one always lives, now more, now less, at every moment of one's life, appeared as experienced truth, in keeping with one's own life.

“Upon this foundation arose organically and quite spontaneously the thought of the Waldorf School. How significant it can be for our spiritual life and our civilization - and

as a reaction, for our economic enterprise - of this very few people have an inkling! For us it is an action which will have a more fruitful and living effect in the world than any business propaganda made so far.

This, his contribution to the fight for a new foundation of our civilization, showed his great capacity of transforming into action what he had recognized and grasped. He was single-handed in this. Very rare is the gift of transforming one's ideas into decisive actions, for it is a path which demands sacrifice, along which many pains and disappointments have to be borne. Emil Molt was ready to face this. In the most generous way he placed his property at the disposal of the School's foundation.

His will-power was needed to the very last in order to remove the many obstacles and difficulties. Henceforth the difficult moments brought to him by the existence of the School did not cease. Against them stood the great, unique experience and the unusual chance of learning while he was for four or five years Rudolf Steiner's collaborator and pupil in the building-up of the School.