

By the start of the 1920s, Dr. Maria Montessori had built quite a reputation around the world. The first Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) opened in 1907 in a working-class neighborhood in Rome, and, within a short period of time, there were schools following her Method not only in Europe but also in the United States, Asia, and Central and South America. Simultaneously, Montessori was also offering courses for teachers and writing articles in Italian and English to publicize her Method and thoughts. Fame and recognition came quickly to Montessori. The world's press recorded stories of how successful her Method was, and cultural leaders placed powerful tools in her hands and supported the growth of her educational system.

However, when the fascist rule became dominant in Italy, Maria Montessori saw that her ideas of education could not work in this authoritarian atmosphere. She realized that schools were part of the social mechanism that conditioned people towards an acceptance of war, prejudice, hatred, and violence. This was in conflict with the social ethos of her schools that reflected a concern for civic virtue and incorporated this by teaching peace, respect, grace, and courtesy, the skills needed to resolve conflicts in an orderly and dignified manner.

"Indeed, the fascists ordered all her schools to be closed. In Germany and Austria (then under Nazi rule), things were even more drastic. An effigy of Montessori was burned over a pyre of

her own books in a public square both in Berlin and Vienna" (*Standing*, pg.85).

So when Montessori returned to Europe at the end of her second American trip, she took the invitation of local government officials in Barcelona and made Spain her home.

A Spanish magazine, *Feminal* had published an article on the Montessori Method on the 24th of September 1911. It "presented the Method's characteristics and highlighted the fact that, by giving children freedom, Montessori managed to maintain a high degree of discipline among them" (*Rubi & Garcia*, 2011). The first Montessori school in Spain was started in Barcelona in 1913, when Spain came to realize that the answer to its need for modernization lay in improving its educational system. In 1913, the Barcelona Provincial Council began to reform the *Casa de Maternidad* from a gloomy orphanage to an institution where the most economically disadvantaged children could receive care from the principles inspired by Montessori's ideas. "Although the project could not be developed in its entirety, the nursery at the *Casa de Maternidad* would become a frame for disseminating Montessori's pedagogical ideas from 1914 onward" (*Rubi & Garcia*, 2011).

John Palau Vera, a teacher who attended the first International Montessori Course in Rome in 1913, played a large role in publicizing the Montessori Method in Barcelona. While the pilot project at the *Casa de Maternidad* was being launched, the Barcelona Provincial Council provid-

ed grants for seven teachers to attend the second International Montessori Course in Rome. Palau Vera also received Montessori's permission to translate her writings into Spanish, and this helped to popularize her work even more.

In 1915, just as Maria Montessori left for America, she sent Anna Maccheroni, who had worked with her from the start, to Barcelona, where a small school with just five children opened. This was the *Casa dels nens* (Carrer Universitat # 21).

The school became popular very quickly and within six months already had over one hundred children.

"There had been no attempt to publicize the school and no promotion was undertaken; there were no prospectuses and no newspaper articles. The parents of the original five children told others, who brought their children to the school and asked that they be allowed to attend." (*Kramer*, 1976, p.248).

Larger premises were needed to accommodate the growing numbers, and the school moved to Carrer de la Diputacio #262.

Around this time, Anna Maccheroni was invited by the Abbot of the Benedictine Order to take part in a Liturgical Congress in Montserrat. Maccheroni felt that the teaching of the Liturgy could be presented to the children and announced that she was ready to try out the experiment in the model Montessori school in Barcelona. With this, Montessori's religious education began, and in

1930, *The Child in the Church* was published. Montessori schools were gaining in popularity, and the City Montessori School opened at Carrer d’Aribau 155.

Plans were made for Maria Montessori to give a training course in Barcelona in mid-February 1916, and so, when Montessori returned from California, she moved to Barcelona to prepare for this.

There were 185 attendees from Europe, Australia, and North America who came to learn the theoretical and practical components of the Montessori Method. As a result of this course, the Association of Friends of the Montessori Method was created. The Catalan government, very interested in educational reform, fully backed and supported Maria Montessori. Her popularity grew, with people expressing their admiration for her and inviting her to visit their schools. So much so that once, when she could not hold back her tears in church and later apologized for breaking down, she was told not to be sorry for, “She had cried with us; she was ours” (Kramer, 1976). Such was her acceptance!

For Montessori, “it seemed, she had finally found the opportunity she had been waiting for, the chance to experiment on a large scale under her own control with the application of her Method to children of various ages and backgrounds and to extend the Method into the program of the elementary-school years” (Kramer, 1976, p. 248).

The Seminari Laboratori de Pedagogia (Diagonal 482), training and research center as well as a school, was the perfect

setting, which the Catalan government gave to Maria Montessori to continue with her work.

“The institute was housed in an old building of traditional Spanish architecture with spacious grounds, gardens, orchards, and winding, palm-lined paths. There were little pools with fountains and goldfish, sheds, and cages for pets, all under the brilliant southern sky” (Kramer, 1976, p. 250).

Around 1920, the Catalan independence movement began to demand that Montessori take a political stand and make a public statement favoring Catalan independence, but Montessori refused to do so. Official support was withdrawn from her programs. In 1924, a new military dictatorship closed Montessori’s model school in Barcelona, and Montessori education declined in Spain, although Barcelona remained Montessori’s home for the next twelve years. In 1933, under the Second Spanish Republic, the government sponsored a new training course and government support was re-established. However, with the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the political and social conditions drove Montessori to leave Spain permanently. She left Barcelona aboard a British warship for England, where she and Mario took refuge. As Montessori herself said to an English newspaper:

“I do not think I was ever in danger. Barcelona was still in Government hands, but the priests had taken an active part in the fighting, and I believe most of the danger to the churches was caused by stocks of ammunition left inside by them. When



an armed escort arrived at my house I thought I was to be taken to a prison, but they assured me that I was safe. ‘We are not killing women,’ they said.

Just then the British Consul’s car arrived and I was told to make immediate preparations for my journey to London. I packed, and within a few minutes, we were driving down to the quay-side with the British flag flying prominently on the front of the car.

The British cruiser Douglas was waiting there, and I was taken on board, received by the commander, and then taken to a cabin. I was the only foreigner and the only woman on board. We left immediately for Marseilles” (*London Evening Telegraph*, August 3, 1936). ♦

References

- Kramer, R. (1976). *Maria Montessori: A biography*. New York: Putnam
- Rubi, F.C., & Garcia, B.S. (2011). *The photography and propaganda of Maria Montessori method in Spain (1911-1931)*. *Paedagogica Historica*, 48(4), 571-587.
- Standing, E. M. (1957). *Maria Montessori: Her life and work*. London