



Delfina Tomassini's
booklet from the 1950
international training
course in Perugia

“We Were Enchanted”: An Interview with Maria Montessori’s Students

By Phyllis Povell, PhD

Italian translation by Fiorentina Russo

IN THE SUMMER OF 1950, TEENAGERS ELVIRA BUSINELLI AND DELFINA TOMASSINI EMBARKED UPON A TEACHER TRAINING COURSE AT THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY FOR FOREIGNERS, IN PERUGIA, ITALY—TAUGHT BY MARIA MONTESSORI. IN 2020, ELVIRA AND DELFINA, NOW IN THEIR 80S, SPOKE WITH *MONTESSORI LIFE* ABOUT THEIR RECOLLECTIONS OF MONTESSORI AND HOW HER INFLUENCE SHAPED THE COURSE OF THEIR CAREERS AND LIVES.



HOW DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT MONTESSORI EDUCATION?

Elvira Businelli: It was 1949, when I was 18 years old. I saw Maria Montessori's name in the newspaper—she was to give a course in Perugia in 1950. Out of pure curiosity, I decided to enroll.

Delfina Tomassini: I attended a specialized teacher's high school and first saw Maria Montessori on a list of psychologists and pedagogists. And in 1949, I heard that she would be coming to Perugia to direct a course on her method—the 29th international course that she offered in her lifetime.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO TAKE THE COURSE?

DT: I asked my parents if they would give me permission to attend, since Perugia was not far from where I lived. They said yes. It was the luckiest thing for me, because attending the course changed my life in two major ways. First, I had the luck of discovering this great person, Maria Montessori. Second, it shaped and guided my professional life, because I obeyed her teachings and advice and applied her Method.

EB: For that era, this experience and this course were unique. To truly learn how to teach children was something that was difficult to understand at that time. There were many pedagogical and psychological



1. Dr Montessori with trainees at the 1950 course. Delfina is pictured at left, just in front of the person with glasses.

2. In 2019, Elvira (middle) and Delfina (far right) received the Baiocco D'Oro honor. This award is given to individuals who have brought distinction to the city of Perugia.

3. Elvira, in her early days as a Montessori teacher



studies that discussed theory, but there was nothing that offered hands-on practice. Having met Maria Montessori, who spoke magnificently about the physical and psychic development of children, I learned the reason why children can learn in a particular way, and each one within his own time frame.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR INITIAL REACTION TO DR. MONTESSORI?

EB: I was very young—I was 18. For me, it was like meeting a fascinating grandmother, a grandmother that you could hug. She was a bit smiley in appearance and always had her son, Mario, next to her. In a certain sense, he put her at ease with us, the trainees. If it hadn't been for him, she would have remained more like a professor at her desk.

In the summer of 1950, Montessori turned 80 years old. In the main lecture hall of the university, there was a ceremony for her. Students from every nationality—there were nearly 100 of us—brought her a small gift from their country. And we Italians had a big bouquet of flowers. I was chosen to give her the flowers because I was the youngest. I approached her, timid, cowering behind the flowers that covered my face. As I reached her, she pushed the flowers away and said to me, “Gracious creature, star of the future!” And she was right—what a future I had.

Below left: Elvira and Delfina receive their awards from the mayor of Perugia.

Below right: Elvira with a young student in the 1950s

Today, I remember her like a dear grandmother, dressed the way they did back in the day, but not in a way that was pretentious. She dressed according to the styles of the 1950s: a long black dress, a necklace, but nothing more. White hair. She was a woman of austerity, dignity, and integrity.

DT: At the time of the course, I was 20. And during the course, in fact, Maria Montessori celebrated her 80th birthday amongst us. I remember that, on the first day, we gathered in a classroom at the university in Perugia. We were waiting anxiously to meet her. She entered the classroom and took her place at the desk after having greeted us as only she could. She was a person who, with her physical appearance, facial expressions, her face, her smile, the strength she carried within herself, her character...she conquered us all. She was a person who was very special.

DID MONTESSORI HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR? WHAT ELSE DO YOU REMEMBER OF HER?

EB: I have to tell the truth. She did not have a sense of humor, but her son did, very much so. As a person, Montessori talked about her Method with utmost simplicity, but we were all speechless and fascinated to listen to her meticulous description of child development. We were enthralled to learn about her



materials, so scientifically targeted, to be used with children in order to give them the freedom of growing by themselves.

There was silence when she spoke. Nearly 100 people present, and you could hear a fly. People were awestruck by her. She taught me how to teach—this I remember very well. And I would never have been a teacher had I not taken that course with her.

DT: Montessori was a person who demanded respect and admiration, but at the same time, she inspired so much faith. Her tone of voice was so strong and soft at the same time. She won over everyone with great ease. Every moment was an important one—no single moment was more important than another. Meanwhile, she made it clear that she had discovered the world of the child, that in the method and in the manner of teaching, the only thing at the center of it all was the child.

EB: I recall her having a very subdued tone and being very precise in her terminology and in her explanations. And more than her speaking, it was that she simply fascinated people. She improvised when she spoke. Her son, Mario, presented the visual materials to illustrate what she was saying. She would follow and see what he was doing; she would anticipate what he would show. There was a feeling of understanding between mother and son.

Each of us felt a direct connection to her as she spoke. We were enchanted. I can't say much more. When we were doing the practical part of the lesson, led by Mario and Miss Paolini [Maria Antonietta Paolini, director of the Santa Croce kindergarten in Perugia], we would ask them many questions. But Maria Montessori was more intimidating. And she was 80 years old. She was tired at the end of class. We didn't ask questions of her.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM MARIA MONTESSORI?

DT: My specialized high school was poorly organized. They taught only theory. I got out of high school not knowing how to teach. But Maria Montessori helped us, communicated with us, and taught us that in being in contact with children, we shouldn't feel like teachers. She taught us to discover the value of every child and their full potential. When, later, as a teacher, I would meet on a one-to-one basis with a child, we began a process of collaboration. There was

no division of teacher and student. There was a unity. We became like one person...like an intertwined knot that grew together.

Listening to Maria Montessori, I understood the individual value of each child and understood that I didn't have to give every child directives to follow. My task was more to discover in each child their potential, and to help each one value and use what they learned.

EB: I am aware today of how much she taught me. At the time, it was an obligation, work...to follow her and her son in class. It was demanding to make materials by hand. What work!

Montessori had such class. I would say, "How can I teach like that...to make them read and write?" Instead, I learned that it was the children who taught me how to do it, by giving them the materials they chose themselves at the right moment. And I learned also the importance of the environment. The traditional kindergarten has a lot of toys and games. The Montessori environment is set up differently, with a dedicated space for each curricular area. And here is where the importance of the well-formed teacher comes in—the teacher must observe and know how to guide the children as they choose the material themselves. What is missing in kids today is focus. That's something that is present in the classroom in the Casa dei Bambini. What comes out spontaneously are activities like polishing shoes, washing dishes for hours, though someone might say—poor things, what are they doing? But they are really focused, and building that concentration again that helps them choose another material and by themselves.

I am a convinced Montessorian, not because I studied it in books, but because I learned from doing. In 1952, I took the Elementary training. And then, in my years of teaching, I saw in practice that the Method is valid, using specific materials to make kids grow autonomously, without oppressing them.

TELL US ABOUT SOME OF YOUR EXPERIENCES AFTER YOU TOOK THE MONTESSORI COURSE.

EB: After the course, in 1950, I enrolled in a second Montessori course, and the director of an Italian school in Barcelona came looking for someone to initiate a Casa dei Bambini in Spain. At the time, it was rare for women to go abroad. I went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and there was an official there who wanted me to teach in the European school in Brussels, in Belgium. Of

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A photograph that Dr. Montessori signed for Delfina (who is pictured at her left shoulder)



the two possibilities, Barcelona won, and there I spent my first 3 years of teaching. It was the first Montessori school in Barcelona. Then they sent me to Brussels, and I stayed there 12 or 14 years. When I arrived at the European school in Brussels, I began organizing the kindergartens there. At a certain point, the professors said, "What's going on? You force the kids too much and the majority arrive already knowing how to read and write." I said, "No, no... they do it on their own. I have nothing to do with it. The quieter I am, the better."

In Barcelona, Franco was dictator, and it wasn't easy to teach in the certain way that I wanted—the way that forms one's personality. It was like Mussolini's time, no? There was that disagreement between Maria Montessori and Mussolini. Mussolini brought her in because she had a great name in Italy, but at a certain point, he backed out, because he recognized that her Method was not equal for all but was too personal, too individual, and he didn't like it. In times of dictatorship, liberty is not easily accepted. I used to get phone calls from the

Italian consulate saying, "They are following and watching you!" I would say, "What did I do? For me, if you are black, white, Communist, Christian, or whatever, you are my friend!"

In Brussels, they used to call me the tabby cat. Brussels is the home of modern math in teaching, and I used to raise my hand to voice different opinions. I didn't always agree, and I questioned people. They called me tabby cat because I would scratch.

In Spain, when people saw the Montessori materials in my classroom—little aprons, etc., used for practical play, props for shining shoes, things of this nature, they would mock me. They didn't understand. I remember trying to make the Method understood. For example, I taught one child whose family had a cook and a maid. When their son came home from school, they asked him, "What did you do today?" And he answered, "I polished shoes." The mother came to me, protesting: "Look, in our house we have a maid that does this!" I invited her to observe the classroom. From that moment, I understood that the parents needed to be educated as to what the Method was, and the environment and its purpose. It took a great deal of effort on my part. Maybe that's why I became so aggressive, tabby cat that I am!

The course changed the direction of my professional life completely, because I would have never chosen teaching. Going abroad was hard because I had to introduce something new in a setting in which I was not understood. When I asked for a base material, a little bathroom for example, they looked at me stupefied, marveling. The fights I had to undertake to put forth new ideas in other countries... But the great satisfaction that I have had is to remember that I have given something, thanks to Maria Montessori who taught me. Had it not been for her, I don't know what I would have done. I tried to be like her. Everything I gave to children, I gave because she taught me.

DT: After the course, I taught at the Montessori school in Perugia. There, I experienced the understanding that when a child was following a lesson eagerly, they were responding to a characteristic inside them. As my students grew up, I followed their progress over time and watched as special likes or dislikes developed, or a preference for one subject over another. A child who enjoyed studying Archimedes and loved using the Montessori materials for large numerical quotients grew up and got a degree in engineering. Another child, who

loved the study of nature, botany, and zoology, got a degree in medicine to appease his parents—but never practiced. Instead, he became an explorer and traveled the world, dedicating himself to environmental studies.

Later in life, I taught in other places. But the same spirit, which Maria Montessori taught me and I brought with me wherever I went, animated my days with the children. As a teacher, I tried to never have an overly dominating voice, and never say, “Pay attention” or “Be quiet.” It was necessary instead to keep alive in each child the idea that each day was precious. I always considered the relationship between myself and my students precious. We were bound together by a sole desire to progress, to be together, while enjoying that which day by day we would take on together.

I taught in non-Montessori schools, where there were children from underprivileged families or who had no parental guidance. At the school, children were treated as if they were numbers. But in my classroom, year after year, my students suffered the least because they found in me someone who understood them, who entered their soul, each and every one. I brought affection, understanding, and collaboration to those children, as per Maria Montessori’s counsel.

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR BIGGEST SUCCESSES?

EB: The children I taught who grew and became adults...an engineer, a doctor, a businessman, a mechanic. They have grown and gone, but they remember this oldster here—they embrace me. It’s a great satisfaction. I believe I had more satisfaction than those who teach adults at the university level because, it’s true, you see a big change in small children as they grow. It brings me great joy.

DT: Recently, one of my former students came to see me and brought her son, who is in the third grade. He had a school assignment to present on a topic in front of his class. This boy decided to talk about his mother’s teacher—that is, me. He interviewed me about the Montessori Method, and he made a whole report about me. Then, at school, they printed it in the school journal and all the families saw it. He was proud to say his mom was the student of Maria Montessori’s student.

Another memory was when I taught 3- to 6-year-olds in a Casa dei Bambini in the Marche region of Italy. There was a child who was traumatized because he had witnessed his mother’s murder at the hands of his father. He would no longer speak as a result; he was mute. I was trying to get him to remember his country house where he was born and had lived. I spoke to him about his environment. I made materials for the nomenclature of animals, pets, and agricultural tools used by his family, and then I stayed at his side to make things come alive for him with my experience as a Montessori teacher. I encouraged him to use these materials to relive the days with his house and family. The first sound he let out after not talking for such a long time was the sound of the sheep: “baaaaa.” After making the sheep sound, his tongue sort of unraveled, and he began to speak again. Day by day, he returned to himself. I secretly cried. It was a beautiful day as a Montessorian.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR SPEAKING WITH MONTESSORI LIFE.

DT: Thank you.

EB: Thank you. You bring me back, it seems, centuries in my life, almost one century.

The course changed the direction of my professional life completely. Everything I gave to children, I gave because [Montessori] taught me. Had it not been for her, I don’t know what I would have done.
—Elvira Businelli



Trainees at the 29th International Montessori Training Course, in Perugia, listen to a lecture by Dr. Montessori.