

Evelin Ilves

Maarja School in Tartu is home to some very special students – true talents in art and handicraft, but yet to learn more everyday skills. Evelin Ilves paid them a visit and dined at the school canteen.

Not far from Chinatown in Tartu, we step into the picturesque courtyard of Jaama manor, built in 1847. It was once a service centre, providing hospitals in the region with equipment and supplies. It also grew and prepared the ingredients for the hospitals' food, which would be delivered to them each day by horse and cart. Today the buildings are full of children. Only the stables and carriage house, which today serve as a canteen, recall the food-making days of the manor's past.

### **Maarja School – the first of its kind**

There's a constant buzz in the school's cloakroom. One boy is on tiptoe, reaching out towards a coat hook to retrieve his jacket; another is tying and retying his shoelaces. "Take your time – there's no rush!" says his young helper, although the boy's hands seem oblivious to the advice. "Just loop the laces through that last hole and you'll be done."

At Maarja School in Tartu lessons are learnt just as often outside of the classroom as in it – in the cloakroom, in the bathroom, on breaks and after school. The students here not only learn your basic reading, writing and arithmetic, but the kind of everyday skills that come naturally to healthy children, but which need constant practice by physically and intellectually challenged kids.

Whenever a child is born with a disability it is a shock to the family. But 'Why us?' is soon replaced by 'So what do we do?'. Many children with varying degrees of intellectual disabilities

resulting from rare and genetic diseases – and including those suffering from Down syndrome, epilepsy and autism – were denied an education during the Soviet era. They were hidden away in homes and enjoyed none of the benefits of being able to read and write, or doing handicrafts, or going travelling.

Maarja School was the first educational institution of its kind in Estonia after the country regained its independence. It started out in 1994 teaching 18 disabled children that paediatrician Anne Daniel-Karlsen found in homes around Tartu County.

### **Teachers with heart**

The school rooms are lined with large windows and are full of light. The floors are covered in rugs that the students themselves have made, while the windows are adorned with their artistic takes on curtains and there are ceramics to be found wherever you look. It feels like being at home rather than in a school. And the people who work here are just as sunny in their disposition as the building itself.

Two of the teachers, Monika Kiho and Ann Särev, are veterans of the place, having been here since the school opened its doors. They both studied the Waldorf methodology of teaching in Finland in the 1990s. Cornelis Lakeman from the Netherlands has taught at the school for more than ten years and has won over class after class of students for his unusual initiatives: he uses music in speech therapy; brought shadow theatre to the school; and thought nothing of transforming one of its bathrooms into a camera obscura. These things we want to see for ourselves, and on our way to the dark room – from a small hole in the wall of which is projected onto the opposite wall an image of the manor – Cornelis happily explains to us how he teaches the kids physics by using examples from real life.

"Speaking of which," comes the voice of principal Jaanus Rooba from behind us all of a sudden, "do you know why people feel so happy when they see a rainbow?" Without waiting for an answer, he tells us: "A rainbow is perfect – it has all the colours of the spectrum, all the qualities of the soul. Green represents peace; red represents initiative; white represents purity. It balances us and brings harmony to our souls."

That's not the only thing we learn on our visit: we also discover that following the straight lines drawn onto the floors in the school helps the kids draw straighter lines on paper afterwards, and that walking past a letter A makes writing it in their notebooks easier for them, too.

## **Master craftsmen**

Everything at the school has to be clear and simple and made as unambiguous as possible, say the teachers who work there. That's why they don't use lots of complicated drawings or pictures or films. Everything the kids learn they learn to do with their hands, whether they're in a cooking class or a biology lesson.

If you put a slice of bread or cucumber in front of a child, how are they supposed to know what a full loaf looks like, or a full-length cucumber? You have to experience the entire cycle to understand and respect life – how things grow up out of the soil and how we use those things to make the food we eat. These are all things that the students at Maarja School learn quite early on during their gardening and home economics lessons, as well as in the kitchen and the school's vegetable patch. They set and clear the tables themselves in the canteen and chip in on all the housekeeping at the school.

"True," admits the principal, "none of these kids will ever be able to cope entirely on their own. They have trouble with generalisation and abstract thought, and dealing with money. But they're amazingly talented when it comes to handicraft – real artists. And that's something we foster."

Some of the students who have graduated from the school are capable of working together in small groups with limited support, the principal informs us, describing life in Maarja Village. They clean, make food, grow their own vegetables, do handicrafts, make music and play sport. Most importantly, they have the chance to live a happy and fulfilling life. Unfortunately, the law is often slow to respond to the realities of life – Rooba says that legislation is much needed that would cover supported work and which would resolve many of the employment-related issues that disabled youngsters face.

## **One cook, five menus**

Before we leave we sit down to lunch with the students in the canteen to find out how the right kind of menu is put together for the kids. To our surprise, we don't find anything unusual – although four or five different menus need to be provided at the same time, there's just one cook, Ilona Kriisa. Her only helper, Liia Oras, deals with the dishes.

"We use almost no sugar," says school doctor Helle Känd, explaining how the canteen operates. "Dessert is nearly always fruit. Meat intake is strictly controlled so as to keep hormones and medication in balance. The dairy products we use come from Pajumäe organic farm, and from autumn our fruit and vegetables come to us from Tartumaa organic farm."

She adds, somewhat surprisingly, that the diabetic children can be fed in the same way as the other kids: the way the illness is treated today means that everything is OK in moderation. Processed, refined and sweetened ingredients never make it into the canteen's recipes. And as if to confirm the fact that children love eating what they're used to eating, the kids in the social studies lesson I pop into tell me that there's nothing they like more than fruit and salad.

## **Maarja School**

Maarja School in Tartu is a municipal school that educates children who need to be taught coping and life skills. It was founded in 1994 by paediatrician and Estonian Chamber of Disabled People chairwoman Anne Daniel-Karlsen, who relied on her experiences in the USA and the assistance of Scottish lawyer Adrian D. Ward to change Estonian legislation so that disabled children are required to attend school.

The school has 84 students who are taught by 37 teachers. It has a total staff of 45. It uses a form of medically rehabilitative teaching that is based on the Waldorf method.

The school provides basic education i.e. from Year 1 through to Year 9. The students have the

right to apply for three additional years of study at a handicraft school.

Many of the school's graduates now live in Maarja Village, which was established on the initiative of their parents. A second such village is currently being planned. The youngsters are able to apply their skills at the support centre attached to the school, where they learn the finer points of carpet-weaving, ceramics and felt work under the watchful eye of master craftsmen. They are also able to work in the school's garden in summer.

### **The favourite dish of the pupils at Maarja School: rye bread cream with peaches**

Serves five

150 g of rye bread  
250-300 ml of apple juice  
125 g of sugar  
200 g of tinned peaches (or 100 g of raisins)  
Cinnamon to taste

Cover the bread with the juice and allow to soften for 2-4 hours. Dice the peaches. (If you are using raisins, wash them and allow them to soak.) Place the bread mix in a pot and stew it over a low heat, adding juice if necessary. Add the sugar and cinnamon to taste. Finally, add the peaches (or raisins) and stew for another 20-30 minutes. Beat until creamy and serve with milk or whipped cream.

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