

# The Montessori Family

a family tree

**Fred Kelpin**



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# The Montessoris

## Alessandro Montessori (1832 – 1915)



Alessandro Montessori started his career as a soldier. Soon thereafter, he became a civil servant at a time when Italy developed from a collection of little states into one large state. He was a fervent supporter of such a modern state, which he served as a civil servant. His field of activity was the winning of salt, the cultivation of tobacco and the sale of these products. Activities that were then still the domain of the state.

Before that, he was employed by the Vatican in charge of the finance of that state. At the time, the Vatican was a lot larger than the mini-state of nowadays. His work in the tobacco led him to Chiaravalle in the province of Ancona on the Adriatic Sea, where much tobacco was grown. There he met Renilde Stoppani, whom he married in 1866.

## Renilde Montessori - Stoppani (1840 - 1912)



Renilde Stoppani was not only a beautiful woman to see. She came from a prominent family and was very well-read. This was certainly not common at the time. She always supported her daughter Maria in every decision that Maria took in relation to her career until her death in 1912.

## Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952)



Maria Montessori was the only child of Alessandro and Renilde. She was born in Chiaravalle in 1870. Shortly after her birth the family moved to the new capital: Rome. Maria had a talent for the exact sciences, especially for mathematics and biology. After her high school, she was trained as a physician at the University of Rome. She was one of the first women to graduate in that field in Italy. In 1896. Her parents would have preferred her to be a teacher. Ironically, they would, in the end, have their way. Apart from being a physician, she was also one of the first ladies in Italy to support the women's lib.



In her specialization at the Santo Spirito hospital in Rome she came in contact with children with intellectual disabilities. She began to focus on their education and studied the work of the French physicians Jean Marc Caspar Itard (left) and Édouard Séguin. She was very successful.

In 1898 she addressed a congress about her work in Turin. She pleaded for a better education for these children. There would have to come a special institute to train teachers for them.

That institute came: the Orthophrenic Institute in Rome. We would call it a Pedological Institute. Montessori directed the institute together with her colleague Giuseppe Montesano. He was more than a colleague. Between them a love affair had developed. On March 31, 1898 a baby boy was born: Mario Montesano Montessori. The father acknowledged the child three years later; his name is on the birth certificate. His mother's name is not. It says NN. The parents were not married; why not is unclear. But together they did develop the curriculum for the institute.

Finally, Maria Montessori left the institute in 1901. Her biographer Rita Kramer writes that it is unclear why. Montessori became shortly thereafter *professor of anthropology* at the University of Rome, which she would remain until 1916. Her lectures at the University were published in her book *Pedagogical Anthropology*.

Around this time Montessori realized that there was nothing in the method she had developed for children with intellectual disabilities that made this approach inappropriate for children without that limitation. If only the method were applied with younger children. In a preschool situation. She got the chance to test this out in San Lorenzo, a district in Rome, where a kind of day care centres, Children's Houses, had been founded in renovated working-class apartment houses.





These 'Children's Houses ' (Case dei Bambini) were a great success. The Casa dei Bambini in San Lorenzo still exists. Montessori describes the method followed in a Children's House in the famous book *The Method, the Discovery of the Child*. When later the Montessori approach was extended to the education for children from 6 – 12 years old, she wrote another book. It is called *Advanced Method* and consists of two parts. In the first part the backgrounds of working with older children are explained. The second part contains an overview of the materials that had been developed for them until then.

Montessori did not only write books about her work, she also travelled the world to give lectures in which she explained her method. In Europe, but also very quickly in the United States (from 1913). Lectures were often combined with a course in which the method was taught and a Montessori diploma could be obtained. Moreover, there were Montessori conferences, where Montessorians could meet and discuss the development of their work.



Montessori travelled to the United States in 1915 again, to the world's fair in San Francisco. She was in the company of her then 17-year-old son Mario. From this trip the *glass classroom* is known. During the exhibition, under the leadership of Helen Parkhurst, children in that classroom were at work. Visitors could see the children at work through the windows. Mario is located on the left in the photo. Third from left is Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori travelled home at the end of 1915. Mario travelled with her. Montessori settled in Barcelona, where she led a Montessori Centre that consisted of schools, a study centre and a course. Mario got married in 1917 to Helen Christy in San Francisco. His mother was present at the wedding. In 1918 Mario and Helen joined her in Barcelona.

Montessori lived in Barcelona starting from 1915. However, with her son and his family, she regularly travelled for extended periods of time to Italy and other countries, to teach in courses there. Rolando, the third child of Helen and Mario was born in Italy. Mario was the most important co-worker of Maria Montessori. Together with his family that consisted of Helen and four children they formed one household, of which Maria was the centre, writes Schwegman.

In Italy the fascist dictator Mussolini had been in power since 1922. Montessori met the new leader of Italy. In 1924. Mussolini supported the spread of Montessori education in his country. All state schools had to be Montessori schools. The ideas of fast evolving fascist dictatorship and the ideas of Montessori about world peace were increasingly at odds with each other. That led to estrangement and, finally, to a breach between Mussolini and Montessori in 1934. The Montessori schools were closed and Mrs. Montessori would not return to Italy until 1947.



During a congress in Denmark in 1929, the *Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)* was established by Dr. Montessori and Mario Montessori. This Association had to ensure that internationally, the consistency in the Montessori approach to education was preserved.

The life of the Montessoris suddenly took a dramatic turn when the *Civil War* broke out in Spain between the Democratic Republic with its elected Government and its army led by the fascist General Franco. A British warship took Maria to London. A congress was held in Oxford shortly afterwards. To prepare this Congress Mario was already in the United Kingdom. During this Congress Ada Pierson was present as an assistant.

The year before she had obtained her Montessori diploma in the United Kingdom. Since the Montessoris could not return to Barcelona and Mario was refused a residence permit in England, Ada, after consultation with her parents, invited the family to come and stay in her parents' house, the villa 'Intimis' in Baarn, the Netherlands. The family, that is Dr. Montessori, Mario Montessori, Marilena, Mario jr. and Rolando. Renilde and her mother had gone to the United States at the outbreak of the civil war. They returned to Barcelona in 1939. Helen Christy continued to live there. Renilde joined the family in Netherlands. At the outbreak of the *Civil War* Helen and Mario had just been divorced. Helen lived separated from the rest of the family together with Renilde in Barcelona.



In Intimis Dr. Montessori completed her book *The Secret of Childhood*, which she dedicated to the Pierson family.

## Dedication

### OPDRACHT

AAN DEN HEER EN MEVROUW ALLARD EN ADA PIERSON  
EN AAN HUN LIEVE DOCHTER ADA  
DRAAG IK DIT BOEK OP  
IN HERINNERING AAN DE TIJD, DOORGEBRACHT  
IN HUN HEERLIJKE WONING „INTIMIS” TE BAARN,  
TOEN DE ORKAAN VAN DE OORLOG IN SPANJE  
MIJ EN MIJN FAMILIE IN DEN VREEMDE JOEG

To Mr. and Mrs. Allard and Ada Pierson and to their dearest daughter Ada I dedicate this book in memory of the time spend in their gorgeous dwelling 'Intimis' in Baarn when the orcale of the war in Spain drove me and my family abroad.



After some time, Montessori started to live in Laren (N.H.), where she founded a Montessori Centre, like she had done in Barcelona. She then lived in the small villa *De Binckhorst* where she started a Casa dei Bambini. Another school was at only a few minutes' walk from her home located in a bigger villa *Groenendaal*.

In 1939 Maria and Mario left at the invitation of the *Theosophical Society* for Madras (now Chennai) in India. For a few months was the idea. To teach courses and give lectures. It turned out to be for seven years, because of the *Second World War*.

Italians were citizens of a state England was at war with. Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, then still one colony, were part of this England. Eventually, they were interned in Kodaikanal, where they started a school and a course. *Cosmic Education* got a more definitive form in Kodaikanal. Montessori wrote two books about this *Cosmic Education: To Educate the Human Potential* and *From Childhood to Adolescence*. She was inspired by the views of Antonio Stoppani.

Antonio Stoppani (1824 – 1891) was an Italian priest. He was a geologist and a paleontologist. Stoppani wrote the book *Acqua ed Aria – La Purezza del Mare e dell'Atmosfera fin dai Primordi del Mondo Animato* [The purity of the sea and the atmosphere has existed since the beginning of life on earth]. Montessori's theory on *Cosmic Education* was strongly influenced

by this book. She always took it with her when traveling. No evidence has been found for the claim that Stoppani was a great-uncle of Maria Montessori.



Mario put the ideas of his mother and himself into practice in the school. Lena Wikrame-radne, a Montessori teacher who they had trained in Chennai, helped him.

During the war the Germans in the Netherlands had closed *Groenendaal* and the school had been moved to another Montessori school in Laren, which was not under the direction of Montessori herself. When Montessori in 1946 returned to the Netherlands she did not re-open the Centre in Laren. She returned from 1947 – 1949 to India to continue her work there. When she was in the Netherlands, she lived in Amsterdam. In Koninginneweg 161.



For her merits Dr. Montessori was distinguished by the Dutch queen Juliana as an Officer in the Order of Oranje - Nassau in 1950.





At that time, Montessori completed her book *The Absorbent Mind* on infant education and cosmic education. She died at the age of 81 in Noordwijk during a short break. She was also buried there. Her epitaph reads:

*I beg the dear all-powerful children to unite with me for the building of peace in Man and in the World*

## Giuseppe Montesano (1868 – 1961)



Maria and Giuseppe formed a love couple at the end of the 19th century. They had a son, Mario, but they did not marry. Giuseppe recognized the small Mario, though. In 1901. The little boy is officially called Mario Montesano Montessori. And his children also have Montesano in their names. Montesano, who like Montessori had studied medicine at the University of Rome, did not change his field of expertise. He became a psychiatrist and continued to deal with the education of the intellectually disabled children.

He developed into an authority in Italy. He gave expression to his social commitment in a number of functions. He was a councilor and the deputy mayor of Rome. When he died at the age of 92 he was given a state funeral.

## Mario Montesano Montessori (1898 – 1982)



Maria and Giuseppe did not get married after Mario's birth. Initially he was not brought up by either of them personally. He lived in the countryside with a farmer's family. His father paid for his school education and vacations. His mother came to visit him, without it being clear to him that the visitor was his mother.

That changed in 1913. The 14-year-old Mario became part of the family that he formed with his mother. To the outside world he initially still remained her nephew or adopted son. Two years later he accompanied his mother to the United States, where he stayed when she returned to Rome because her father had died.



In 1917 Mario got married to Helen Christy in San Francisco. Maria Montessori was present at the wedding. He provided for his family in various ways. For example, by opening a Montessori school in Hollywood that was attended by the children of movie stars such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. In 1918 they came to Barcelona, where they formed a household with Maria Montessori. About Helen is further but little known. Mario and Helen had four children: Marilena, Mario, Rolando and Renilde. They divorced in 1936.

Mario was officially called Mario Montesano Montessori. So he signed his mail: Mario M. Montessori.

Personen Volkstelling 1947

Meertens Instituut — Databanken — Familienamen

**Montesano Montessori**

Onderstaand treft u één of meerdere personen aan die met deze naam bij de volkstelling van 1947 werden geregistreerd. Let wel: voor gehuwde vrouwen geldt dat zij uitsluitend geteld zijn met hun meisjesnaam.

De Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen toonde bij haar 200-jarig bestaan een aantal naamstrookjes van bekende en minder bekende mensen op haar jubileumsite; zie [hier](#).

Mario Montesano Montessori, geb. 31-3-1898, won. Koninginneweg 161, Amsterdam;  
Mario Montesano Montessori, geb. 22-4-1921, won. Herengracht 349, Amsterdam;  
Renilde Montesano Montessori, geb. 15-5-1929, won. Koninginneweg 161, Amsterdam.

[terug](#)

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His children are also called Montesano Montessori. This is shown, for example, on the slips of the 1947 census of the city of Amsterdam, which have been preserved in the *Meertens Institute* in Amsterdam. As the children did not use the name Montesano I leave the name out further on in this article.



Mario was the most important co-worker of his mother. In her last will, she appointed her son sole heir to her work. He carefully carried on that work as General Director of the AMI. His contributions to the further development of the method are considerable, in particular, with regard to *Elementary School* and *Cosmic Education*. But already in *The Discovery of the Child* Maria makes mention of the *botanical wallets* developed by her son.



The role of Helen Christy in the life of Mario has always remained underexposed. She was the mother of his children. We do not know much more about her. Two of those children, Mario and Renilde, would later play an important role in the further development of the Montessori method. About Mario's second wife, Ada Pierson, whom he married in 1947, we know more. She had been a major support to Maria and Mario since 1936 and continued to assist Mario after Maria's death in 1952. Ada had followed a Montessori training in Amsterdam, which she had exchanged for a training with the Montessoris in Oxford in 1935. She was *Secretary* of the AMI when Mario was *General Director* and was the mainstay of the AMI after Mario's death.



## Marilena Henny – Montessori (1919 – 2009)



Second World War. He and Marilena were awarded the *Resistance Cross*. In 1949, Jan was also awarded the *Bronze Lion* by Prince Bernhard. This Lion is intended for soldiers who have fought for the Dutch State and who have committed particularly courageous and discreet deeds. The *Bronze Lion* can also be awarded to Dutch citizens and foreigners who meet these requirements. Since its introduction, 1,210 people have received the *Bronze Lion*.

In the photo: Marilena with her children Pieter, Alexander (to his mother's left) and Helen. Her daughter-in-law Patricia Wallner, the former wife of her son Pieter, is an AMI trainer at the Assistants to Infantry level.

Marilena's son Alexander served on the *Board* and *Executive Committee* of the AMI for some time. He runs the *Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company*. This publishing house presents existing books by Maria Montessori and new lectures collected in book form and related material developed by Dr. Montessori.



## Mario Montessori jr. (1921 – 1993)



Mario was born in Barcelona. With his brothers and sisters, he led a *nomadic existence*, as he himself called it. He lived as a toddler in Italy. In Naples, Milan and Rome. He went to a Casa dei Bambini in London. His sisters and brother often lived in other places than he did. When the *Spanish Civil War* broke out in 1936 his brother Rolando and he lived in Barcelona. His father was in London. On the torpedo boat that took his grandmother to London they were not admitted. The brothers travelled to London under the guidance of a co-worker via Genoa and finally they moved in with the Pierson family in Baarn, the Netherlands. Mario finished his High School at the *Baarns Lyceum*. In 1941 he took his final *Exam HBS A*. It was with reluctance that he stayed on in the Netherlands.



*Mario III*  
1953 - 2000



*Carolina*



*Ada*



*Nicolina*



*Rolando*



*Resistance Cross*

Mario had always wanted to be an agronomist in the tropics. To help people grow their food there. That was a good thing, because there was a *University of Tropical Agriculture* in Deventer. There he went. In addition to agriculture, he was involved in food aid to Jews in hiding. On the day he graduated, Mussolini summoned all Italian men to arms. Mario was one of those men, but he didn't want to be a soldier. He went into hiding in Amsterdam, where - via his sister Marilena - he again became involved in the organized resistance. As a bicycle courier he brought materials (microfilms, weapons, ammunition) to and from the *Biesbosch*, from where it was smuggled across the border. He never used weapons himself. He was awarded the *Resistance Cross* for his resistance work. And he realized that there were other ways to help people than as an agricultural engineer. He started studying psychology at the *Free University* in Amsterdam.

Mario was educated in the traditions of the analytical psychology founded by Carl Jung. But he finally felt more attracted to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. In this realm of thought he discovered many notions that he knew from his grandmother. After the war he followed a training in psychoanalysis and became a staff member at a psychiatric facility in Santpoort. In the Dutch and international *Professional Association for Psychoanalysts*, he played an important role. In 1961 he became a self-employed psychoanalyst in Amsterdam.

As a Freudian he could mean a lot to various groups of people in distress. To the children of NSB people (followers of Hitler in the Netherlands) who after the war were blamed for errors that their parents had made, something in which they, as a child had had no part. In Amsterdam, in the seventies, he also opened his house to Chilean refugees in Amsterdam who had fled Pinochet's regime. Together with his children he gave them a home. And I remember how during a *Montessori Congress* in Amsterdam in 1979 he outlined the problems that children of Berbers (Moroccans) that were born in the *Atlas Mountains* encountered when they were suddenly exposed to the totally different environment of Amsterdam.

Moreover, he was also a guardian of the ideas of his grandmother and his father in the Netherlands. He saw the introduction of the new *Law on Pre-primary Education* in 1956 as an attack on the quality of *Montessori Education* in the Netherlands. For instance, in this law children were not allowed to attend school until they were four instead of three. As a result of that, a number of formative activities of the child suffered, because they could no longer be offered in the suitable sensitive periods.

When he noticed that, at a Montessori school in Amsterdam, his youngest son was taught writing and reading in another way than his grandmother had recommended, he again went to battle. Afterwards he stated that there were no *Montessori-schools* in the Netherlands because those schools had not implemented the *Cosmic Education* that his grandmother and father had developed. He founded the *Stichting Montessori Centrum* (SMC) in order to improve the quality of *Montessori Education* in the Netherlands and he became its *Secretary*. Prof. Dr. Jan Koning was the *President*. And this way the former *Montessori Centre* in Laren was continued after all.

The Centre has been of immense significance for the quality control and improvement. Not in the least since Mario managed to appoint a *Pedagogical Didactic Employee* especially for the Montessori education, who was involved in quality control, research and quality improvement. The *Montessori Schools* became real *Montessori Schools* again, since the implementation of Cosmic Education was carried out now.



It is therefore logical that Mario for all his social commitment was distinguished as an *Officer in the Order of Oranje-Nassau*. Just like his grandmother.

Mario and his wife Elly van der Linde raised a large family of five children. His eldest daughter Carolina shares her profound knowledge of the Montessori history by participating in the organisation of the archive of the AMI and making books and series of lectures ready for publication.



*Carolina Montessori*

## Rolando Montessori (1925 – 1988)



About Mario and Helen's third child, Rolando, we do not know so much. The reason may be that he left for the United States at an early age in 1960. In 1967, he was given the American nationality. He married Anne Dege from Delaware. Her parents were German immigrants, who had come to the United States in 1900.

Rolando and Anne had one son, Phillip Montessori, who was born in 1962. Phillip now leads the *Montessori Corporation*, which is committed to the dissemination of Montessori education in all strata of the population of the US.

## Renilde Montessori (1929 – 2012)



Renilde Montessori, in the photo with her sons Saulo (top) and Pelayo, was the youngest child of Mario Montessori and Helen Christy. Initially she chose a career outside the *Montessori World*. But that changed in 1968 when she became an assistant to her father.

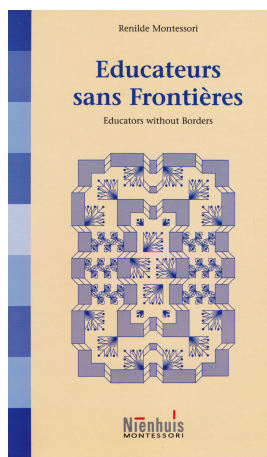
She followed a *Montessori Course* in 1971 at the *Washington Montessori Institute* where Betty Stephenson was *Director of Training* that time. Then she started giving lectures and she founded a *Montessori Training Centre* in Toronto (Canada), which she led herself.



In 1995 she came back to Amsterdam, to the house in the Koninginneweg where she had lived with her father and Ada in 1947. The apartment on the upper floor became the home of the *General Secretary* of the AMI. She had lived there as a pupil of the *Amsterdam Montessori Lyceum*.

Five years later, she became *President* of the AMI. She kept that up to 2005, the year in which she retired and returned to Cataluña. In the ten years that Renilde lived in Amsterdam, she put a lot of things on track. She took the initiative to set up a website for the AMI at a time when many people wondered what such a thing actually was.

She supported the completion of another project that had been running for years: capturing all the Montessori materials in detailed drawings: *the Blue-prints*. This project too more than ten years' time.



From her intensive contact with her grandmother, she knew how important Maria judged the application of her thoughts outside the immediate school world. In order to encourage Montessorians to do the same she founded, *Éducateurs Sans Frontières* which are meetings for Montessorians in which the educational principles and practices of Montessori education are thoroughly revisited from the perspective of society at large. She wrote a book about it which appeared in French (2000) and in English (2005).

She also made every effort to organize the *Archives* of AMI, a rich source of study material. That took a lot longer than she had thought it would. The re-opening of an *International Montessori Study Center* in Spain was not realised.

In her days as *Secretary* and *President* she made the world aware of the value of *Montessori Education*. She spoke fluent English, Spanish, Dutch, French and Italian. That facilitated her task enormously.



Of her two children Saulo was closely involved in the activities for the AMI. He was a long-standing member of the *Board* and also was a member of the Board that directs the *MM 75 Fund*. That Fund which was established when his grandfather became 75 years of age, gives interest-free loans to Montessorians who are trained as *Montessori Teacher Trainers*.

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