

EMFS nursery in Mae Hong Son, April - June 2007

By Claudia Weidenhoffer

At the beginning of April 2007 I started my volunteer job in Mae Hong Son (MHS). Shortly after my arrival I realized that MHS is a small, wonderful town in a green environment in the North of Thailand. When I was in Switzerland, I couldn't imagine how it will be, in what kind of accommodation I will stay, how I will get in contact with my family and friends in Switzerland and how the infrastructure will be. However, at my arrival (almost) all my worries disappeared. I was very relieved.

As you can read I was concerned about a lot of things. I really wanted to do a great job and I was so thankful for this chance to be part of the project but I completely forgot to inform myself about the political and social situation of the Burmese people. I just knew I will work the next three months with Burmese children.

I was surprised about the closeness to the Burmese border and I wasn't conscious about the fact that 80% of the population in MHS is from Burma meaning that I will get in contact also with Burmese people and not only Thai.

At the EMFS nursery school I was together with Andrina, another volunteer. She helped me before finishing her time as a volunteer. This overlap of 3 days helped me a lot. In my opinion this would be of great value for everyone starting as a volunteer at EMFS. She showed me around and introduced me to the activities of a kindergarten-day. All this made my start easier and it gave me time to get to know all the children, the teachers and the cooker.

Two weeks later she left MHS after having supported me in organizing a room and a bicycle. So I was settled and could start to focus on my work with the children.

Through my work as a pediatric nurse I know children quite well but nevertheless it was completely different. In my opinion you can't compare children from different countries, different "worlds". Their autonomy surprised me. Most of the time they played by themselves with elementary things as a piece of paper, a small car or a plastic animal. As soon as I brought something new, for example a match game, they pushed themselves forward, started to battle to get the new game. It was important for me to show them new games and it amused me to see the curious look of the children. I brought some things from Switzerland like paint for children, a big ball to bounce or small "stones" to make chains. It is not necessary to bring such games from Switzerland since in MHS there are enough shops to buy most of these things. I think all these "special" activities are a good alternative to the regular program in the kindergarten.

However, the daily program was helpful for me to know when to do what with the children and also for them it is a good exercise to start school. It is defined when the children have to arrive, when they can play, when is lunch-time, ect.

I very much appreciated that the kids were divided in two groups. The small ones played and the older ones did exercises to write numbers and the alphabet. I rotated after a couple of days and so I saw both groups

During my three months stay I had my camera with me. It was a great pleasure for the kids to take pictures from each other or to be on a picture themselves. As goodbye present for the children I prepared photos of them.

The language was never a problem; neither with the children nor with the rest of the people. I learned to do conversation with “sign” language. My life was very beautiful and carefree during this three months. A lot of my friends asked me how this is possible, how I could be careless in a “world” like this. I don’t know what it was. Maybe the amiability of the people, the nature, the laughing kids around me.

Apart from the laughing kids I did a lot of trips in different villages where I saw the poorness of the population, I saw armed policemen arresting an old woman because she didn’t have the permission to go out of her village and I saw a small child dying from malaria.

Maung Maung organized a lot of trips for me. I visited overnight different long-neck villages and I was invited to an original “Karen” marriage in a village of a friend of his. Thanks to Maung Maung and Andrina I got informed about the situation of the Burmese and the ethnic minorities. To find all these information on the internet is hard and it is particularly difficult to find the right ones. Also the visits in the villages helped me to better understand this foreign culture and the situation. I always had the possibility to get a day off at the kindergarten to be part of a special ceremony or to visit something.

I would like to thank everybody for this wonderful time. It was an amazing enrichment for my life.