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EXILE ON THE PATHS OF HOPE

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Comenius called Poland his second motherland. Rightfully so. He was connected to the Polish reality not only through the long period of life he spent there but also through his thinking activity, when he was occupied between the years 1628–1656 that he (intermittently) lived in Poland with efforts to improve the circumstances into which his home country was plunged due to the counter-Reformation oppression that followed the catastrophe in the wake of the White Mountain battle defeat.

Key words: Leszno, *Excidium Lesnae*, *colloquium charitativum*, Bartoloměj Nigrinus, Sádovský family, market of the world

Introduction

The first stay of John Amos Comenius in Leszno was bounded by the years 1628-1641. John Gauden Hartlib repeatedly calls on Comenius to come to England. After obtaining the permission from the Council of Elders in Leszno he leaves for London in the middle of the month of August 1641 by way of Gdańsk. While there he receives in October 1641 an invitation from Ludvík de Geer to come to Sweden and that is where he goes in the year of 1642 via Netherlands and Denmark. In July the same year he meets in Leiden with René Descartes. He arrives in Norrköping on 29 August and in September receives audience with Queen Christine and Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna. As a venue for his stay is selected Elbink (Elbląg in original Polish) and he moves there with his family from Leszno. In August 1648 he returns to Leszno as a prominent senior of the Unity of Brethren. His second

stay in his second home in Poland lasted only two years. By the middle of the year 1650 he received a letter from Zsuzsanna Lorántffy in which she invited him to Transylvania. Mikuláš Drabík – former student of Comenius – had a major influence on him to accept this invitation. This „tragic sojourner of Comenius“ as he has been called by Josef Polišenský presented to him a collection of his prophecies according to which Sigismund Rákóczi were to become the “chosen king” that was going to return liberty to nations and to release them from the yoke of “Antichrist and Babylon”. Comenius filled his residency here with labor not only on the third version of his textbooks system and the beginning of work on his magnificent opus *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*, but also on practical educational activity in the Petcock school in the pan-sophist spirit in addition to attempts to convince the duke to fight for victory of good and truth over violence and injustice. All the hopes for the change of the situation in Bohemia and Moravia disappeared with the death of this prominent supporter of Comenius, Sigismund Rákóczi. During his residence in Potock Comenius repeatedly visited Prešov in May 1652. He was offered direction of local school, but much more important were his political discussions with Klobusice and ducal commander János Kemény.

During this period Comenius created one of his political manuscripts, perhaps not great in its size but important in its content, *Gentis felicitatis* (Štěstí národa), in which Comenius inspired by the Dutch model pictured the conditions necessary for economic and cultural development of the Transylvanian domain. In addition, the manuscript described the conditions for the prosperity of any modern society. Through this tractate he wanted to gain for his reform plans the Transylvanian duke, György Rákóczi.

Pilgrim on the paths of hope

He parted from his “pan-sophist’s operation center” on 2 June, 1654, and embarked on his journey via Prešov and Levoča to his “home” in Leszno.

This brief overview of the peregrinations of this man of hope and longing in a “Bermuda-like triangle” (Poland, England, Netherlands) only suggested how Comenius’ life was not full of mythical stories of sufferings and losses but, instead, of bitter life fates and of untrue games of true people who frequently presented themselves as patrons, friends, worriers for the purity of faith and authenticity of religion, true fellow-brethren, and in the final phases succumbed to the ensnares of ideological religion and power lust offered by politics paired with a “true faith.” It should be noted before-

hand that Comenius was not a program preacher of faith and of politics association but a convinced theologian adhering to the belief that there is need for faith in the process of peace mission realization.

We have here of course a dividing plane that is time-defined by his direct stay in Poland as well as by the subsequent period of 17th and 18th century when his importance as thinker was almost forgotten. This "silence" period ended in the second half of 19th century. Then his educational theses reappeared as there rose an interest in educational thought in Europe and Comenius' visionary thoughts returned to Polish educational thought as a creative, solid, and lasting impetus for further development.¹

An important source for an objective evaluation of the importance of Comenius' stay for his social and reform-related activities is his personal relationship to his „other motherland“, as he called Poland. In this direction it is possible to bring to mind the study of Antonín Danysz² that discusses the emotional attachment of Comenius to Poland, appreciates his mastery of Polish, and tells about the care of Laszczyński family for the great thinker. These circumstances are pointed out by Lukáš Kurdybach³ in his monograph. In addition, we have to highlight the works by comeniologists such as those of Slovak Ján Kváčala⁴ and Czech Jan Václav Novák⁵ and, furthermore, by a French author, Ann Heyberger.⁶

The evaluation of Comenius' stay in Poland is seriously complicated by his forced departure from Leszno in the year 1656 when his decision is connected with his distinctive depiction of the tragic tableau of the destruction of Leszno in his manuscript **Excidium Lesnae** (Destruction of Leszno). This work was published shortly after he had written it in Dresden lacking in its first edition any information about its author or when and where it was printed. Later on it was republished by Franz Neemann in the year 1894.⁷

We can hardly accept the opinion of L. Kurdybach who claims that the reason behind writing this brochure was to „(...) justify in the eyes of West-

¹ Comp. T. Wieczorek, *Odrodzenie pedagogiki Komeňského w Polsce w polowie XIX wieku*, [in:] *Komenského poselství člověku a světu*, ed. M. Somr, Conference proceedings, USB in České Budějovice 2000, p. 43-48.

² A. Danysz, *Jan Amos Komenski, przyczynek do jego działalności w Polsce*, Poznań 1898.

³ L. Kurdybach, *Působení Jana Amose Komenského v Polsku*, kapitola XII, Prague 1960, p. 19.

⁴ J. Kváčala, *Johann Amos Comenius*, Leipzig 1892.

⁵ J.V. Novák, *Jan Amos Komenský: jeho život a spisy*, Prague 1920.

⁶ A. Heybergerová, *Jean Amos Comenius (Komenský): sa vie et son oeuvre d'éducateur*, Honoré Champion, Paris 1928.

⁷ F. Neemann, *Comenii Lesnae excidium. Beilage zum Programm des könig. Gymnasium, Leszno 1894.*

ern Europe his unexpected departure from Leszno and to elicit sympathy for the Unity of Brethren."⁸

Comenius describes his cruel fate in his letter to Hartlib after his arrival in the Netherlands. It is dated August 31, 1656, in Amsterdam.⁹ He rejoices that he entered the city with a happy outlook („at least so it appears at the beginning“) and that he was welcomed by his protector as he calls Vavřinec de Geer. The passage of time showed that this merciful reception was aimed in different direction than what Comenius assumed. The letter is, however, important to us as regards the – already quoted – opinion of L. Kurdybach that it does not cease

(...) to praise the Lord that through His merciful intercession we were not engulfed. And because He lead me after such horrible wreckage together with the fragments of The Treasure of Light (meaning whole pan-sophistic work of Comenius – M.S.) into this harbor (...).¹⁰

He expresses his relationship to the town Leszno and to its difficulties through his active pursuit of assistance: „I endeavor to help them in their misery everywhere I have the opportunity to pass through and to give regards to my coreligionists“.¹¹ The oppressive feeling and his active interest in the fate of his coreligionists is the outcome of his relationship to the Unity and to the brethren over whose fate he felt entrusted with a responsibility. There is no bitterness, instead there is a compassionate entreaty to all who should and could help. Nothing changes the fact pointed out by Comenius in this letter that the descendants of Huss (Hus) „thrice knocked on the gates“ of England and unsuccessfully pleaded for assistance and that he does not anymore attempt to secure the favor of material assistance. Comenius finds himself now in the triangle of European labyrinth between Poland, England, and the Netherlands whose regard of the Czech question is not entirely indifferent but, at the same time, not forthcoming or active.

Let us go back to our original thought about Poland being for Comenius another motherland and about the reason why the Czech exiles selected specifically Leszno as their main center and as the starting point of their reforming endeavors. The situation in Poland was special. In this Catholic land the gentry were more powerful than their king. In his tract *Excidium Lesnae* (Destruction of Leszno) the reason that he gives for the selection of Leszno as

⁸ L. Kurdybach, *Působení Jana Amose Komenského*, p. 20.

⁹ J.A. Komenský, *Vybrané spisy. Autobiografická vyznání plány a dopisy*, svazek VIII, SPN, Prague 1975, p. 334-336.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 334.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 335.

a „kind of metropolis“ of the evangelicals in Great Poland is the fact that Rafael of Leszno, the son of count Ondřej of Leszno, took them under his protection and had enacted religious reforms according to the rituals of the Czech confession and by having done that he had prepared the ground for the arrival of the Czech Brethren. Comenius describes the coming of his co-religionists with great plasticity and with obvious personal passion for the welcoming space of the Polish land.

When after 1620 started in the Czech lands the most extreme persecution of Protestants and not long after that the Protestant clergy and the gentry were declared as outlaws and they had to seek out refuge in Poland, they were taken under the protection of pious and courageous Sir Rafael of Leszno, Belz Palatine allocated to them Leszno, Włodawa, and Baśranov as asylum.¹²

Besides the Czechs resided in Leszno also Lutheran confession emigrants from Silesia, German burgers, and Polish Catholics and the town was rapidly growing. There were 1,600 houses, approximately 2,000 residents registered in the lists of burgers, and besides that many folks with no town affiliation; furthermore, there were three town squares, four churches, a renowned gymnasium, and more than twenty thoroughfares. The old Leszno parish church that was during the years 1550 - 1654 used by the Czech or the Reform religious community was after a complaint that had been lodged with the bishop of Posen taken from them and assigned to the Catholics by the power of the royal courts' edict. After the loss of this parish church a new sanctuary for the Czech emigrants as well as for the other Reform confessions was constructed between the years of 1632 - 1635.

A very spacious cathedral has been built so that worship could be held there according to the Augsburg confession; three priests, learned men, were active there together with a school in which the language of instruction was the mother tongue [German - M.S.] and with several elementary school teachers, and it was here besides the gymnasium that was common, and where was established the position of a vice-principal (protector) who was learned of Augsburg confession.¹³

Leszno overcome all other Polish towns with its rich trade and with its development of crafts as well as with its „marvelous grace.“ Comenius captures in a very emotional way the atmosphere of its tolerant environment offering protection not only to those who were exiled from their homeland for their confession but to all „true Christians.“ This provoked according to

¹² J.A. Komenský, *Vybrané spisy, historické spisy a politické spisy*, svazek VI, SPN, Prague 1972, p. 234.

¹³ Ibidem.

the author of contemporary document hatred and hostility of the enemies of the evangelium and of Catholics who addressed their mendacious accusations against solid citizens to Zikmund III as a call for an immediate intervention. Comenius refers to the complainers as to a “bunch of conspirators” and describes the progression of their intentions with a considerable indignation. Specific key moment in this hostile atmosphere was also played by a sad event. It was the death of Rafael from Leszno as a result of which the domain fell to his third son Bohuslav who converted to Catholicism. Comenius attributes this change to the immense pressure the adherents of the Catholic confession elicited on him. The island of “religious tolerance” was in Catholic Poland not only provoking grudges but also a feeling of threat to the state system. It is enough to remind us that the religious “schism” was useful to the Swedish policies and that is the reason why his Swedish patrons, most of all Ludvík de Geer, tended to remind Comenius about his duties and about the proscription to participate in religious events in a quite blunt way. This culminated in September 1645 when during the period of a growing onslaught for recatholization in Poland a „colloquium charitativum” took place in Polish Toruń with the participation of Comenius. His conduct, as J. Panek points out, was

apriori fated to be a failure especially due to the intransigence of Polish Lutherans that was fueled by the Swedes. Despite the justification of Comenius’ participation through the representation of the Unity of Brethren and despite its full correspondence to the ecumenical and irenic vision it was yet another fiasco. In the eyes of the Swedes on whom he so relied he became a traitor without gaining even a minute result.¹⁴

The background of this natural course of action of the last bishop of the Unity of Brethren analyzes L. Kurdybach.¹⁵

Not only was the political framework of this action unknown to Comenius but in his conceptualization of the idea of peace and religious reconciliation it was ill-conceived. We can use the non-episodic episode to illustrate his diplomatic inexperience as well as his ineptness. Faith into the conduct of man as that of a divine creature was not in currency even among the representatives of religious life and, during that period, especially not among the adherents of the militant Catholicism. The leading role in the whole big „theater” that was to be the meeting for the reconciliation of Polish reformed churches with Catholicism –the „colloquium charitativum” (friendly debate) – had no prospect of success as the central idea was not of confession but,

¹⁴ Pánek J., *Politické labyrinty Jana Amose Komenského*, Filozofický časopis, 1992, 14, p. 90.

¹⁵ Kurdybach L., *Působení Jana Amose Komenského*, p. 150-174.

instead, of political power. The conclusion of religious strife in Poland was to open the gates for the realization of the Polish king's, Vladislav IV, plans that had „(...) while ignoring the further fate of the king's initiative, a courageous and progressive character.”¹⁶ The whole idea had at its inception two individuals with insurmountable resentment against religious reconciliation: Pope Urban VII and a „Northern eagle” - Oxenstierna. Orthodox, dogmatic line of religion and Modena style of political manipulations dramatically exacerbated the fundamental opposites of a possible solution. Fanatic thought accompanying both sides filled with its intransigence European continent. Comenius was, therefore, in the midst of conflict of interests that along with his other plan involving England in his idea of Czech national „uprising” - or its „rising from the dead” - got him into his precarious position. We will devote a separate chapter to this phenomenon (The path to the world's light).

The initiator of the Torun meeting from the side of the Polish non-Catholics was Bartoloměj Nigrinus: a man with rich religious past who was born into an Arian family who converted to Lutheran confession when he reached maturity and later on to Calvinism.¹⁷ As a secretary of Vladislav IV he resided in Gdańsk and had scores of assistants who not only collected for him the necessary material for the possibility of religious reconciliation but gathered for him support among his Polish coreligionists as well. Nigrinus decided to recruit Comenius for the discussion meeting with utterly clear aims: to detach Comenius from Swedish influence and to retain him in Poland. His plans he attuned to the very sensitive side of Comenius' efforts: to the need for assistance to his brotherly coreligionists as the situation of non-Catholics became progressively more difficult and unbearable not only from the confessional aspect but also from the humanitarian, material and psychological. Such „heart asthma” reached a state of existential endangerment. The state of mind of evaluating and judging of the given conditions causes Comenius to arrive at a conclusion that the responsibility for the contemporary state bear non-Catholics together with the Catholics because of the exaggerated view of their own powers “while judging their own situation”. Perhaps that is the reflection of the influence of his former patron, Karel the Elder of Žerotín. With an insurmountable resentment toward the Czechs he also negated the Czech path to the situation redress through the estates' uprising that was an open signal to the igniting -until then- of the greatest European conflict.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 151.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

Thus on one side stands with his plans and arguments Bartoloměj Nigrinus who is leaning on the favor of the king himself and who displays his material wealth secured by the king's favor and on the other side "alms support" from the Swedes that is given by the arms magnate de Geer. That was yet another scar on the soul of an exile and disinherited pilgrim as during his participation at the religious meeting in Toruń the "gracious city council of Leszno" had to provide him besides clothing also with two shirts. The support of de Geer did not always arrive on time.

Comenius explains the background of the acceptance of Bartoloměj Nigrinus' arguments in his letter to Jan Matěj Roth. He communicates to the Swedes that the situation of the non-Catholics is still hopeless and admits that both sides, Catholics and non-Catholics- are to blame. At the same time he of course arrives at an extreme position when he expresses his sharp condemnation that Protestants are not sufficiently "objective" when they frequently over-rate their existing conditions. This could of course elicit aversion toward Comenius from the side of the Swedes as well as a strong suspicion that Comenius is getting ready to switch sides and to move on to Vladislav IV. Moreover, there might have arisen a suspicion that he wants to arrive with his attitudes and activities as regards his theological conceptions of reconciliation and harmony at an accommodating and total reconciliation with the Catholic party.

With a reference to a monographic study by J. Kváčala¹⁸, L. Kurdybach points out another important circumstance: it is worthwhile to give attention to the circumstances that at that time even Polish brethren tried to gain Comenius for Polish interests and to convince him to break off his contacts with the Swedes. After his return from England Ondřej Wiszowaty contacted him and warned him that he will have to deal with an anger of the gentry if he will work for Sweden and promised him very advantageous conditions were he to start working for Poland.

Bartoloměj Nigrinus and Valerian Magni played the leading roles in the whole "diplomatic" procedure of the preparation for the friendly Toruń meeting while the earlier one tried to convince Comenius about the necessity of his direct and active participation in the preparations and in the content of Toruń meeting by somewhat unethical arguments that were clearly coercive and politically unscrupulous.

Nigrinus' arguments for the reconciliation path among the churches were for Comenius admissible and not only corresponded with the spirit of his convictions about the general reconciliation but were for him also politi-

¹⁸ J. Kváčala, *Marja Habsburska i walka Komenskego z braćmi polskimi*, Warszawa 1928.

cally and theologically acceptable. However, the conversions of the pastor from Gdańsk who was born in an Arian family, converted to Lutheran conviction when he had reached his maturity, later on converted to Calvinism, and finally finished his journey when he converted in 1643 to Catholicism, were not.

Mediaeval religious “diplomats” always had for their deeds “divinely sanctioned” justifications. Nigrinus’ argumentation space fits exactly into the political background of a power mission that it was supposed to sanctify: it was to give space for the maneuvering of king Vladislav IV. On the one hand, this was the purpose of the reduction of tensions between the churches of the Polish Catholics and Protestants, and this was the way, on the other hand, to reinforce the power of the ruler in the land in which the gentry was still more powerful than the king. And, it was to eliminate the danger that in the case of a conflict the Polish Protestants would join the side of the Swedes. Comenius was to be made involved in this power project through his vision of the future, because the reality of the contemporary situation was to him too distant and its background was too darkened through the diversity of the interests his “patrons” directly and indirectly aimed at him.

Comenius had his diplomatic attaché too and it was no one else but his son-in-law, Petr Figulus. His task was to find out from the decision making person at the Swedish royal court, from the architect of the Swedish politics Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna, how he perceives Comenius’ activities. The rules were unambiguously blunt and totally rigorous:

- Immediately interrupt contacts with Bartoloměj Nigrinus
- Resign on the preparations for and the participation in the Toruń colloquium for the reconciliation among churches
- Not to leave Elbing.

It is necessary to remember very substantial moment that relates to Comenius’ stay in Leszno. Among the thousands of new coming non-Catholics and exiles from the Czech lands was after the release of the “Land reform regime” (Obnovné zřízení zemské, year 1627) there was also the Sádovský family from Sloupno. Václav Sádovský, a former colonel in the Swedish army, became an important representative of the Czech exiles in Poland, their prominent speaker and later on a strategist in the attempted military overthrow in the Czech lands. It is impossible to neglect the fact that he played an important role as an ambassador and diplomat in the English republic with its Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell.

Sádovský aristocratic family of Sloupno played an important role in the ranks of the Protestant aristocracy and the family head, Jiří Sádovský of

Sloupno, was a leading personality in the political life in Eastern Bohemia. His family gave on their property protection to the family of Comenius. Comenius served as a tutor to the four sons of the husband and wife Sádovský. Following the annunciation of the constitution both families together had emigrated to Leszno as was already mentioned.

We will return to the persona of the eldest of the Sádovský family sons, Václav. Under the Swedish command he fought against the Habsburgs and reached the rank of cavalry colonel. The Czech exiles fixed their hopes on successful campaign of the Swedes from whom they expected that they will break through the Habsburgs' dogmatic line of Catholicism and in such a way their path home would be opened.

Even though the Westphalia peace in its first phase buried all their hopes to return to their homeland, all Czech exiles, nevertheless, focused on their vision of better future and hoped for the establishment of European Protestant coalition.

Conclusion

Life's reality was enthroned with its brutality, bluntness, inevitability, and deceitfulness. The destruction of the "heretics' nest", Leszno, by the Polish Catholic peasants meant not only the loss of the two libraries of the Reformed Church and of the printing press brought to Leszno from Kraslice but also the fulfillment of the exile's fate, of a pariah who on his journey reached the final port of his life. Originally from an intent to spend a mere one winter season in Amsterdam, the town became, instead, his home for the last fourteen years of his life. Truly home? It certainly became a safe harbor and a creative place for a finale of the endlessly ending race of time. In Amsterdam he resided at first in the house "At diamond rose's", but the lodgings seemed to him to restricting and he moved to the house "At white lamb's" on Egelantiersgracht.

Amsterdam was during the time of Comenius' arrival a magnificent town of almost 150, 000 residents where new markets, networks of streets and canalization have been established. To the development of the "world's market" contributed even its enemies, the Spaniards, because they needed Amsterdam merchandise. It was also a safe town that had 300 guardsmen who served in the town streets and clergy of various confessions took care of the citizens' spiritual needs in the Amsterdam churches. Amsterdam was a model-like and model-to-emulate town of the 17th century. Amsterdam period showed Comenius in all his greatness, wholeness and it clearly estab-

lished that his pedagogic endeavors were and will remain a basis for the building of a great construction by the “Teacher of nations” who became a European philosopher-thinker, humanist, politician and a moral reformer – theologian and Paneuropean.

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