

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

JAN AMOS KOMENSKY—THE FATHER OF MODERN EDUCATION-Part 1 of 2

By Robert R. Boehlke



Illustrated portrait of Jan Amos Komensky (Source: <http://cate.trip0d.eu/100418/>)

“The Czech settlers who first came to the Silver Lake region chose wisely when they reached back in their history to name their village and school, “Komensky”. In so doing they honored one of their people’s greatest sons, Jan Komensky, whom the world knows by his Latinized family name, Comenius. During his high school days the middle name of “Amos” was added because it meant “loving” in Latin. Likewise after his Latin studies he chose to be known as Comenius, a change in family status which was adopted by many persons before and during his lifetime. The life of this 17th century Czech could be symbolized appropriately by the words, *Achiever Extraordinary in spite of Adversity*.

Comenius was a proponent of peace but experienced war, a lover of his homeland but had to live in exile. He worked for Central European reconciliation but experienced war. He was a bishop for his Unity of Brethren, but devoted much of his time and energy to the field of

education. He was a prolific writer who had to watch his beloved library turned to ashes three times. Comenius was the proverbial prophet without honor in his homeland but was appreciated in Sweden, England, the German states and the Netherlands, but turned down an invitation to teach at Harvard! In his personal life he experienced the personal sorrows of being orphaned at twelve, twice a widower and the deaths of some of his children. He dreamed of sharing his vision in Moravia and Bohemia but had to die and be buried in the Netherlands



Statue of Jan Amos Komensky, near his gravesite in the churchyard of the Naarden Walloon church, Naarden, Netherlands (source: <http://standbeelden.vanderkrogt.net>)

Who was this man whom posterity has named “The Father of Modern Education” and whom the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) honored in 1957 by publishing a collection of his writings?

Jan was born on March 28, 1592, an only son joining four older sisters. His parents were committed members and leaders in the local parish of the Unity of Brethren. This meant that

prayer and Bible reading were as much a part of the children's life as eating and sleeping. He attended the school in his church but found it an experience more suited to extinguishing, rather than encouraging learning as an exciting opportunity. His family life was comfortable by the village's standards until disaster struck when Jan was 12 years old. Then both parents and two sisters died suddenly, most likely of the plague.

In spite of being orphaned at twelve he became a bishop of his church and a most prolific writer. One biographer listed 92 published works in Latin and Czech. Even if he had been permitted to live securely in a few places with a growing library, the achievement would be amazing. But he had no security. Instead he had to take advantage of every moment to do his writing wherever he was. We must remember that he traveled extensively and often as bishop and educator in a time when the choice of means was walking or by horse! While in school in Germany he began to compile a Czech-Latin and Latin-Czech dictionary with a treatise on Czech grammar. He continued this project for the next forty-four years. When it was ready for printing in his place of refuge in Leszno, Poland, opposing army units turned his personal and cultural achievement into ashes.

When Comenius and other Brethren members found refuge on the states of Count Charles of Zorotin in Bohemia, he wrote *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* to encourage his sorrowing and bewildered church family. Unlike most of his writings, this one was in Czech. With theirs and his world crumbling, he voices his despair of the world and seeks consolation in the security of his spiritual self, as did John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Comenius was pressed to write textbooks in Sweden and did so reluctantly. Part of the reason he became persuaded to undertake this task was political. He had been given a verbal promise that the Swedish government, a significant power then, would protect the Brethren's interests at the peace table to end the Thirty Years War. But that promise was set aside while the Catholic and Lutheran princess drew the lines of demarcation for adherents of their respective faiths, with interests of princes of the Reformed persuasion given tacit toleration.

For the Brethren, there was no provision for them to return to Bohemia and Moravia in safety. For Comenius personally, this blow was especially heavy because he had also invested much psychic and faith capital on the words of Christopher Kotter, a self-styled prophet, that God would return the Brethren to Bohemia and Moravia."

NEXT WEEK: Komensky embarks on his project to summarize all human knowledge in the work which he called *Pansophia*...

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. Děkuji! Tony Kadlec