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# J. A. Comenius, 1670-1970

## A Bibliographical Commemoration

*Milada Součková*

**L**AST year the three-hundredth anniversary of the death of Comenius, the great Czech humanist and educator, was commemorated throughout the world, with Czechoslovakia as the leader. John Amos Komenský, the last bishop of the Old Moravian Church, lived in an age as turbulent as our own; political unrest and religious intolerance interfered with many of his projects; ill fortune dogged him wherever he went. Even so, his fame spread throughout Christendom during his lifetime, and his educational reforms were well known in the New World. The story that he was considered for the presidency of Harvard in 1654 will be touched on later.

He was a great educational innovator, but his ideas, like those of many great men, were founded so solidly upon common sense that once adopted, the wonder is that they ever seemed strange or new. Thus when Comenius suggested that children should be taught Latin by being told the meaning of the words, the concept was revolutionary. A picture book illustrating Latin words and sentences does not seem wildly original to us, but *Orbis Pictus*, published in 1658, established an entirely new system of learning, and was so popular in its time that it could be found wherever Latin was taught.

Although Comenius is now less widely known than during his own century, anniversaries of important events in his life have been observed during recent years in Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Japan, China, and even in war-plagued Vietnam. Exhibits opened in Leningrad, Moscow, Johannesburg, Montevideo, and many other cities, as well as in small Czechoslovak towns. The General Conference of Unesco, at its ninth session, held in Delhi in 1956, decided to publish a volume of selections from the works of Comenius to celebrate the third centenary of the publication in Amsterdam of his *Opera Didactica Omnia*. The volumes appeared in 1957 and were reissued in 1957.

The modern Czech reader prefers his work written in Czech. *Labyrint světa* (The Labyrinth of the World) has for many years been read as a classic of Czech literature; *Kšaft umírající matky Jednoty bratrské* (The Bequest of the Unitas Fratrum) has been interpreted by the Czechs as a bequest to the Czech nation whenever it might find itself in difficulties or suffering from oppression.

His contemporaries recognized in Comenius a towering mind. His *Janua linguarum reserata* was the book most often published in the seventeenth century; his innovative educational system, as well as his enlightened humanism and his love of truth and peace, made him known on all the frontiers of intellectual progress. The policies of the Counter-Reformation forced him to leave his country; the exile, however, opened avenues of communication which would have closed if he had stayed home. He was asked to go to England, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, and America. Perhaps not many Harvard men know that in 1654 John Winthrop, Jr., is supposed to have extended an invitation to "that brave old man Johannes Amos Comenius, the fame of whose worth hath been trumpeted so far as more than three languages . . . could carry it . . . to come over into New-England, and illuminate this Colledge and country in the quality of a President; but the solicitations of the Swedish Ambassador, diverting him another way, that incomparable Moravian became not an American."<sup>1</sup> Strangely enough — for our contemporary imagination — Comenius' supporters thought that he might be instrumental in the missionary and educational work among the Indians.

The Comenius anniversary seemed an appropriate time for the Slavic Division of Harvard College Library to check the Library's holdings of his works. Three bibliographical sources were chosen: first *Dějiny české literatury* (Prague, 1954, pp. 440-454); second, the bibliography attached to the book *Jan Amos Komenský*, by J. Kopecký, J. Patočka, and J. Kyrášek (Prague, 1957); and finally the bibliography *Knižní dílo Jana Amose Komenského* by J. Brambora, (Prague, 1957). The first is primarily oriented toward the student who wants to acquaint himself with material for the study of the great pedagogue; it includes not merely Comenius' works and books about him, but also essays and articles in various books and periodicals. This bibliography, which concludes the chapter about Comenius in *Dějiny české litera-*

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fitzgibbon Young, *Comenius and the Indians of New England* (London, 1920), pp. 1-2.

*tury*, lists 124 titles, of which the Harvard College Library lacks only 28. These figures appear in an even more favorable light if one considers that 18 of the 28 titles represent either different editions or translations and that the remaining ten are articles of no great significance. Here, perhaps, it should be said that the Harvard College Library has the two most relevant periodicals dedicated to Comeniological studies: *Archiv pro bádání o životě a spisech J. A. Komenského* and *Monatshefte der Comenius-Gesellschaft*. Similarly gratifying results can be reported from the checking with the chronological bibliography of Comenius' works in *Jan Amos Komenský* and with the alphabetical list in J. Brambora's study, which covers all of Comenius' works (even those that were lost), their editions, and translations into Czech. It showed that Widener has *Veškeré spisy J. A. Komenského*, the collected works, of which publication began in 1892, the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Comenius. The first volumes appeared only two decades later, but they and their sequel continue to be of major importance. The Library has the facsimile edition (1957) of *Opera didactica omnia* (1657) as well as its translations. Moreover, the search brought to light a number of collector's items. Harvard libraries have thirty-six seventeenth-century editions, published mostly in Amsterdam or in London between 1631 and 1685. Rare indeed is the Houghton Library's first edition of *Manuálník*, published in Amsterdam in 1658; the catalogue refers to the Czech bibliography by Tobolka (IV, 4238), and the book has a prehistory: originally a thousand copies of it were printed in Lešno, but all of them perished in a fire. In the language and style of Comenius' period one may say: *Habeant sua fata libelli*. Of special interest is also the 1669 edition of *Janua linguarum reserata aurea*, published in Prague, which at that time was one of the centers of the European Counter-Reformation. Such was Comenius' intellectual authority that his fierce ideological opponents published his work. The *Historia persecutionum Ecclesiae bohemicae*, probably a reissue of the 1647 edition, is particularly valuable. Among the early translators, the English are the first; the Library has *A Reformation of Schooles*, a translation of *Pansophiae Prodrromus*, published in London in 1642. To the English and for that matter to the Dutch and the French, Comenius was not only a teacher-innovator, but a man able to seize the progressive vision of his time. It was because of this that invitations came to him from such diverse sources as Cardinal Richelieu and John Winthrop. In Comenius' age a new



Europe, our modern world, was on the rise, and he was among those who collaborated in its making. This is the achievement for which he was and is honored.

The part which the United States took in the 1956-1958 celebrations was unfortunately very minor. In April 1957, Salem College in Winston, North Carolina, had an exhibit, and the *Science Digest* printed a translated and adapted article originally issued by Unesco. It is not by publicity, however, that ideas survive their author. It is not the bronze monument erected in Naarden, where Comenius was buried, that keeps his memory alive, but his writings. And in this respect, the Harvard College Library was not found wanting; its libraries are well equipped to meet the requirements of a student or scholar. Its collection of Comeniana may commemorate without reproach the anniversary of a man who three centuries ago might have become the University's president.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

CHARLES BERLIN is Lee M. Friedman Bibliographer in Judaica in the Harvard College Library and heads the Library's Hebrew Division. His Harvard dissertation (1963) was an edition of *Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*, by Elijah ben Elkanah Capsali.

DUNCAN ISLES teaches at Birkbeck College of the University of London; his "Johnson, Richardson, and *The Female Quixote*" appears in the new edition of *The Female Quixote* (ed. M. Dabzel) that was published in the *Oxford English Novels* series during 1970.

JAMES R. MCGOVERN is Acting Chairman of the History Department of the University of West Florida, Pensacola.

GEORGE P. MAYHEW, Professor of English at the California Institute of Technology, is the author of *Rage or Raillery: the Swift Manuscripts at the Huntington Library* (1967). His Harvard dissertation (1953) was on "Jonathan Swift's Games with Language."

ROGER W. PEATTIE is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Calgary.

LAURENCE SENELICK is Assistant Professor of English at Emerson College in Boston, Artistic Director of the Harvard Producing Organization, and Editor of *Dickens Studies*.

MRS. MILADA SOUČKOVÁ continues a part-time association with the Slavic Division of the Harvard College Library despite retirement and a recent appointment as Visiting Professor of Czech and Slovak Literature at the University of Chicago. She is the author of several volumes of poetry and of literary history, including *A Literary Satellite; Czechoslovak-Russian Literary Relations*, which was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1970.