

Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670)

“My life was a pilgrimage, I never had a home,” wrote Jan Amos Comenius, bishop of the Unitas Fratrum, two years before he passed away in the Dutch city of Amsterdam on November 15, 1670. “It was a restless and continuous wandering around; nowhere and never did I find a home.”

Jan Amos was born on March 28, 1592 in Nivnice near Uherský Brod in Eastern Moravia. He later Latinized his Czech last name, Komenský, into Comenius. By the age of eleven he had lost both his parents and two sisters. After finishing his study of theology at the University of Heidelberg, Comenius became head master at the school of the Brethren in Přerov in 1614, where he had gone to school himself. In 1618 Comenius married Magdalene Vizovská and together they moved to Fulnek in Silesia, where he served the church as pastor and teacher.

These were the years that the Unitas Fratrum, or Unity of the Brethren, enjoyed unprecedented freedom, however this was soon to change. In 1620 the Protestants were defeated in the Battle of White Mountain. A year later Spanish troops seized Fulnek. Comenius' library was burned on the town square. He and his wife and their two children fled the city. Magdalena and the children soon succumbed to the hardships endured during the flight, and Comenius was left alone.

Comenius found a new home in Brandýs in Eastern Bohemia, where he wrote one of his best known works, the Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart. In 1624 he remarried Dorota Cyrillová.

During the times of persecution in Bohemia a branch of the Unitas Fratrum had formed in Poland. In 1628 Comenius moved to Leszno, the center of the Polish Unity, where he was consecrated as a senior (bishop) of the Unity in 1632. In Leszno Comenius wrote many of his pedagogical works that made him famous throughout Europe. He received invitations to teach from England and France and even from Harvard in Massachusetts. For some years Comenius worked in Sweden and in Elbląg in Northern Poland.

In 1648 Comenius and his family left Elbląg for Leszno. Unfortunately, Comenius' second wife, Dorota, died shortly after their arrival in Leszno. In the same year 1648 a peace treaty was signed

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ending the Thirty Years' War which had devastated large parts of Europe. Although other Protestant denominations were recognized in the peace treaty, the Unity of the Brethren was not included to Comenius' deep disappointment.

In 1654 Comenius went back to Leszno. Again disaster struck. When the Swedes invaded Poland in 1655 the Brethren sided with the (protestant) Swedes. When the city of Leszno was recaptured by the Poles in 1656 they burned the city in retaliation. It was the third time that Comenius lost everything he owned.

Now Comenius, his third wife and his family took refuge in Amsterdam where he was welcomed as a respected scholar. Because he had lost his own library in Leszno, the mayors gave him the key to the town library. The mayors were also willing to finance the publication of his pedagogical works. Consequently, the four volumes of the Opera Didactica Magna appeared in 1657.

Thanks to the financial support of his friends in Amsterdam Comenius could dedicate himself to his pansophical studies. Comenius wanted to design an all-embracing system of all human knowledge, based on divine revelation. For Comenius, knowledge, virtue and piety served only one purpose: to place humankind in its right place within creation. Comenius did not separate between divine revelation and science. His goal was to improve humankind and the world.

On November 15, 1670, Comenius died in Amsterdam. A week later he was buried in Naarden, a town south-east of Amsterdam. The chapel where he was buried is now a mausoleum and is open to the public.

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