



Helena Kovářová

ORCID: 0000-0001-7868-6362

Comenius Museum in Přerov, the Czech Republic

TRAVELS BY THE CZECH TEACHER AND SCHOOL HEADMASTER FRANTIŠEK SLAMĚNÍK IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF COMENIUS IN POLAND AND THE NETHERLANDS AS EVIDENCE OF COMMITMENT TO COMENIOLOGY

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Abstract: At the turn of the 20th century, the interest in John Amos Comenius' legacy was on the rise. While various basic monographs and studies were published at the time, his biography still contained a lot of uncertainties and the list of his works was incomplete. In addition to historians, some teachers who admired Comenius engaged in searching for new facts that would contribute to answering some issuable questions. One of them was František Slaměník, the founder of the oldest Comenius Museum. This paper focuses in detail on Slaměník's reports from his private travels abroad to places linked to Comenius' life. Slaměník's texts are interesting evidence of comeniological discourse in the Czech lands at the last quarter of 19th century with overlap to the beginning of 20th century.

Keywords: John Amos Comenius, František Slaměník, comeniology, traveling, Naarden, Leszno

Introduction

The origin of comeniology as a scientific discipline in the second half of the 19th century in the Czech environment is closely linked to the activities of patriotic teachers and the teacher movement, as they pressed for the so-called Czech school in the Austrian monarchy. This question became one of the political priorities of the forming national and civil society and Comenius was its symbol. This fact had a great influence on Komenský's reflection in Czech lands, as it caused a strong accent on the pedagogical part of his work. During this period, it was mainly teachers who systematically researched Comenius' life, found support in his work for their requirements (eg teaching in his mother tongue), as well as inspiration. To the main works, crucial for the development of comeniology, belong *Život Jana Amose Komenského* (The

Life of Jan Amos Comenius, 1871) by František Jan Zoubek and *Život a díla Komenského* (The Life and Works of Comenius, 1892) by Josef Klika. Strong impulses gave comeniological research a celebration of the 200th anniversary of Comenius's death in 1871 (according to the then poorly determined year of his death) and celebrations of Comenius' 300th birth anniversary in 1892. It stirred immense interest in his life and work among experts as well as the general public in the Czech Lands. The main organizer of the festivities held in March 1892 in Přerov, the city where Comenius studied and gathered his first bits of experience, was František Slaměník, the headmaster of a local school. As he was too busy organizing the event, he couldn't accept an invitation to the unveiling ceremony of the Comenius memorial in Naarden, the Netherlands, that took place at the same time. He hoped to meet the Naarden officials in August 1892 on the occasion of another Comenius celebration that was to take place in Přerov together with a teachers' congress, but he later only received a salutation with an apology. Slaměník later considered travelling by his own means to the place that "all Czechs consider holy" outside the times of official celebrations.

František Slaměník (1845–1919) met the work by Comenius as a child. His father and grandfather owned several rare prints, including *Orbis pictus*. It was the beginning of his strong emotional interest toward the history of Czech reformation. Other Comenius pedagogical writings were at time of Slaměník's youth just discovered and published in the Czech (*Didactics* 1849, *Informatorium* 1858). The Czech, patriotic-minded teachers possessed in the 2nd half of 19 century the biggest contribution for the increased interest in Comenius, especially in Moravia region, where Slaměník studied (Olomouc) and worked (Kroměříž, Kojetín, Přerov). He became one of the co-founders of the District Teachers Association named after the "Teacher of Nations". Slaměník actively participated in the first Czechoslovak teachers congress in Prague in 1870, as well as the second meeting in 1871 in Přerov, where was decided to build the Comenius Monument. According customer wish was Comenius depicted as a teacher with a pupil for the first time. Until this time, Comenius's portraits had only the attributes of a scholar. In 1874, when the memorial was unveiled in Přerov, Slaměník was one of the keynote speakers. He became the editor of the educational magazine called "Komenský" (Comenius) in 1880. In Přerov he founded the oldest museum dedicated to Comenius and the Unity of Brethren in the world in 1888. He took the library "Comenius-Stiftung" in Leipzig as a model.

He was a promoter of Comenius' works and thoughts, a knowledgeable guide through the exposition as well as a skilful rhetorician. He expanded his collection thanks to his contacts with local as well as foreign antiquarians, and he gathered new contacts and items for his collections during his frequent travels. His fondness of travelling at the beginning of his professional career was limited by a lack of financial means. He could only start travelling abroad more often once he had extra income from giving pupils private lessons and later from time-consuming participation in the editorial preparation of "Komenský" magazine (Slaměník, 1907: 158 and 379) subtitled "An educational weekly magazine intended for our teaching staff as well as friends of education and our beloved youths".

František Slaměník also looked into areas of dispute regarding Comenius' life, and he did fruitful research in Czech archives about Comenius' stay in Fulnek and later also directed his efforts at foreign institutions. On his private journeys, he searched for any documents related to the life of the Teacher of the Nations and subsequently published his findings in "Komenský", and later also in other newspapers and magazines. He mediated the information to a wider group of public and has undeniable merits in the field of popularizing of comeniology.

Slaměník and Polish towns

Being a member of the Comenius Gesellschaft, he attended reunions of the society, e.g. its founding meeting in Magdeburg in 1891, in Leszno, Poland, in October 1893 and in Berlin in 1896. In Leszno, the town where Comenius lived for many years, he visited Robert Frommberger, a local evangelical pastor. Frommberger showed him round an archive and a church where Comenius worked. František Slaměník also met a junior clergyman named Wilhelm Bickerich, not anticipating at the time how important this meeting would later prove to be.

He returned to Leszno in 1906 when travelling the following route: Prague, Liberec, Herrnhut, Görlitz, Wrocław, Leszno, Poznań, Toruń, Elbląg, Malbork, Gdańsk, Berlin, Leipzig, Prague. His destinations were places linked to Czech non-Catholic refugees (the generations from the 16th to the 18th century). Slaměník was very emotional about meeting the renewed Unity of the Brethren. His depiction of his stay in Herrnhut is strongly emotional, and he presents the relationships between the church members as almost an ideal Christian society. The director of the local Brethren archive and member of

the Comenius Gesellschaft, Josef Müller, enabled him to study the most precious pieces from the collection. What mostly caught Slaměník's attention was an old print published by the Unity of the Brethren with handwritten notes made by Jan Blahoslav.

Another stop on Slaměník's journey was Wrocław, where he wanted to study the former library of Charles the Elder of Žerotín, patron and guardian of Unity of the Brethren. He knew the library listing made by the official Moravian historiographer Béda Dudík in 1877, who received for his study support from the Moravian Regional Committee. He hoped to get an opportunity to examine the significant collection that was deposited at the evangelical parish office of the St. Magdalene Church in 1641 and later was transferred to the municipal library. Slaměník was first accompanied by a young clerk who did not know anything about the Žerotín library, but in an effort to show him the most precious pieces, he presented to him a Brethren hymn book in a binding with the Žerotín family crest. The librarian later explained that the family's collection was not deposited all at one place but was classified by topics. Slaměník copied and published a description of the comeniological manuscripts *Truchlivý (The Mournful)*, *Přemýšlování o dokonalosti křesťanské (Thinking about Christian Perfection)*, *Centrum securitatis, O truchlivým a smutným (About the Mournful and the Sad)*, *Labyrint světa a luthauz srdce (Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart)* (Slaměník, 1906: 602) and several other prints. In addition to Comenius' works, also hymn books of the Unity of the Brethren were included.

In Leszno, he met his friend Wilhelm Bickerich, at that time the first pastor of St. John's Church, a member of the Comenius Gesellschaft and an enthusiastic comeniologist. He translated, among other things, Comenius' treatise on the doom of Leszno that was published in 1904. Slaměník copied a document entitled *Agenda k svěcení biskupů (Agenda on Bishop Ordination)* from the church archive *in situ* and published a list of selected old prints of the Unity of the Brethren and comeniological manuscripts.

However, he paid the most attention to *Liber foundationum donationumque in Bohemia*, a manuscript from the 16th century that he had a chance to examine in 1893. He immediately copied an annotation by Comenius from 1670 about the graves of his parents and sisters. Slaměník considered this document very significant, and thanks to the accommodating attitude of Pastor Bickerich he borrowed it and brought it to Přerov, where the city council stood security for it in writing. In 1907 and 1908, he made a complete copy of it that is now part of the collection of the Comenius Muse-

um in Přerov. Slaměník couldn't help but replace the word Bohemia with Moravia in the title. He later informed the general public about the manuscript and its content in national and regional newspapers.

Since Slaměník could only travel during holidays, the administrators of the relevant institutions in Poznań and Elbląg were away on travels at the time of his arrival and he did not get the chance to see the documents and old prints.

Slaměník's first time in Naarden (1902)

Slaměník was interested in confirming the exact places of Comenius' birth and death as well as the exact position of his grave. On 20-31 July 1902 he travelled to Amsterdam and Naarden for the first time following this itinerary: Halle, Magdeburg, Hannover, Amsterdam, Naarden, Aachen, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt am Main, Würzburg, Nuremberg. He shared his experiences with the readers of "Komenský" magazine (particularly with teachers) in the autumn of the same year. Similar to other sketches from his travels, it included various kinds of information such as a description of the landscape, means of transport, gastronomic curiosities, trouble he had when looking for accommodation as well as excursions into the history of the cities and towns he visited. The most significant element was the expert comeniological information and precise searches from local resources.

When in Naarden, Slaměník found a monument that he described as a "heap of rocky stones" and compared to the "Hus Stone" in Konstanz (Slaměník, 1902: 570). He believed that the monument stood on Comenius' grave. This mistake was due to an article written by a participant in the Naarden celebration published on 31 March 1892 in one of the most popular Czech newspapers. The unknown author wrote: "Comenius' tombstone registered in the grave book under number eight, however, remained at the same place and nowadays a dignified monument stands above it, the surroundings of the barracks having been turned into a neat park." (Oslava, 1892: 3). Other periodicals repeated this erroneous piece of information.

Only after meeting Mr. Wesseling, the mayor of Naarden, Slaměník learnt that the grave was situated in a different part of the town and for the Czech environment he corrected the confusing information. He then went to see the Roeper's brothers. The notary Jacobus Philippus de Roeper, their uncle, checked the grave register and came across a mention of Comenius' burial having taken place at No. 8. The two brothers owned a dossier with

documents, from which Slaměník picked two dated 18 December 1871, and he published exact copies of them in his travelogue. The documents were notarized declarations of two builders (Bartolomeus and Hermann van Rhijn) regarding the authenticity of tombstone No. 8. The van Rhijn masonry masters were in charge of the renovation of a former Walloon church after its incorporation in the barrack area. According to the Ministry Decree of 10 March 1861, all old tombstones were removed and used as paving for the passage to the barracks. In December 1871, tombstone No. 8 was, upon Mr. Roeper's wish and with the permission of the relevant authorities, collected from the barrack passageway and its authenticity was checked with a document with seals. Slaměník saw the gravestone, a stone plate with Arabic number 8, in one of the Roeper brothers' flats in Naarden. Slaměník also included in the text a graphically precise copy from the burial register of the former Walloon church concerning place No. 8 and an entry from the cash register book confirming the receipt of 15 guilders for the burial of Comenius.

The content of the burial register of the former Walloon church was published in the Czech Lands in 1874 by the historian Jaroslav Goll in *Magazine of the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia*. Participants in the celebration received a facsimile of the document in March 1892. The Roeper brothers also gave one copy to Slaměník.

Having studied the documents from the Roeper brothers' collection, Slaměník wanted to see the actual place of Comenius' grave. Through the intercession of his guides, he was able to enter the building of the former Walloon church in the barracks, and he wrote: "I actually stood on Comenius' grave!" (Slaměník, 1902: p. 600). On the other hand, he was appalled by the fact that soldiers were accommodated in the same building. The situation did not change much in the course of the following twenty years as we know from a report by the Prague journalist Egon Erwin Kisch written in German that was printed in the *Prager Tagblatt* on 25 December 1926.

As to the dispute about the place of Comenius' death, after he returned home he took the side of those who doubted that the corpse had been transported from Amsterdam to Naarden (Němečková, 1962: 41–42). Slaměník believed that Comenius fell ill and died in Naarden. He changed his opinion a year later when he read a reproduction of a letter by Comenius from 2 November 1670 written in Amsterdam. Because of the mention of a serious illness, Slaměník considered it very unlikely that Comenius could have travelled the distance. It remained a mystery why Comenius was buried in Naarden.

A second time in Naarden (1908)

In 1908, Slaměník went on his second trip to the Netherlands following this itinerary: Bregenz, Konstanz, Schaffhausen, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Heidelberg, Mainz, Liège, Antwerp, Rotterdam, The Hague, Scheveningen, Amsterdam, Naarden, Kassel, Eisenach, Regensburg, Nuremberg. He shared his experiences with the readers of the Bulletin of the Central Society of Teachers' Unities in Moravia. A year later his texts were published as an independent publication.

In Heidelberg, he visited a library where the librarian Dr. Wille let him have a look inside the printed editions of the university registers. Under entries dated 19/06 1613 and 20/09 1613, he verified the name Joannes Amos, Nivanus, Moravus (Slaměník, 1909: 11–12). According to Dr. Wille, students always wrote in the register the place of their birth, which is why Slaměník considered this evidence to be the key to solving the age-long dispute about the place of Comenius' birth: his hypothesis stirred discussion about the trustworthiness of this argument. As was later revealed, students could also state the place of their residence, not exclusively the place of their birth. That is why Slaměník concluded that "the question Brod or Nivnice? remains unanswered" in his article published in 1916 in "Monatshefte des Comenius-Gesellschaft" (1916) and later in his feuilleton in "Zlatá Praha" (1917) and "Lidové noviny" (1911). To this day, no convincing evidence has been found to definitely resolve this dispute.

In Amsterdam, Slaměník searched why the places of Comenius' death and burial differed. He found no clue in the municipal archive. But he learnt from Karel Bähr, a priest from a reformed church at the Dam, that wealthy families formerly had family tombs outside Amsterdam due to a high level of underground water. This theory was also confirmed by G.J. van Roeper from Naarden, who added that the de Geers had a tomb in nearby Crailoo in which the body of Comenius, presumably, should have been laid. However, the intention was marred at the last minute due to some epidemic in Amsterdam. Sadly, Mr. Roeper could not remember the source of his information. Slaměník considered this information to be the most probable explanation and published it. He pointed out the need to search further in the Dutch archives for information about the epidemic, but due to the lack of knowledge of the language and monetary resources he could not do this research.

In 1908, Slaměník also visited the Comenius Museum in Naarden, and he described the exhibited collections, including a register of burials with

a notice of Comenius' grave, in great detail. The Roeper family, the original owners of the book, had heavy hearts over the forced cession of the book to the museum. They were still the owners of gravestone No. 8. It was procured with notarial seals in 1902 so that its authenticity could be verified, and in 1908 it was attached to a stone pedestal so that it would be exhibited in a dignified way.

Several months after his return from the Netherlands, František Slaměník was given an opportunity to buy it, but the price was far too high. Although even the city of Naarden wanted to have the gravestone in its collection, it couldn't accept the price of 1,500 Dutch guilders. The overly inflated price was due to the very bad relationship between the Roeper family and the Naarden Museum. Ludwig Keller from the Comenius Gesellschaft in Berlin was among those who advocated for the gravestone to remain in Naarden. Eventually, an auction was held in Amsterdam in 1909 in which a representative of Naarden and the National Museum in Prague represented by Mr. E.W. Moes attempted to buy the gravestone. The initial price of 100 Dutch guilders rose to 575 guilders, which was some 1,200 Austrian korunas at that time. The gravestone was then transported to Bohemia and exhibited in the National Museum for a long time. On the basis of this event, an article was published in "Zlatá Praha", a popular magazine at the time, alongside reproductions of church drawings and photographs of the gravestone (Fabian, 1910: 117-118).

On 25 March 1911, Slaměník held a lecture about his visits to Naarden and his knowledge about Comenius' grave and his gravestone at the Old Town Hall in Prague. His lecture was also serialized in "Lidové noviny". Slaměník firmly believed that Comenius' grave was destroyed by soil humidity and could not be found anymore. That is why he suggested that the room above the grave be rebuilt into a chapel accessible from Klosterstraat. He appealed to the regional government of the Kingdom of Bohemia, the government in the Netherlands and other institutions to establish this monument. Slaměník himself could not be involved in this matter anymore as his health issues prevented him from further travels. Czech researchers returned to Slaměník's articles about Naarden after 1918 when the search for Comenius' grave became more intense, as there were relatively few published reports about this subject. His reports from the beginning of 20th century were a link between the information of Czech patriots and researchers from the 1870s (plus from the year 1892) and the final research at this field from the 1920s and 1930s (Němečková, 1962: 53).

Conclusion

František Slaměník has great merits in the fields of building a museum collection and popularization activities. His comeniological research focused on tiny details from Comenius' life, therefore he couldn't write such a fundamental synthesis as for example the work of Ján Kvačala, the founder of comeniology as a modern discipline. Jan Kvačala and other comeniologists (for example Josef Šmaha) appreciated Slaměník very much. He couldn't start university studies because of his parents' financial situation (Hýbl, 1996: 6–7). He gained his deeper knowledge by self-study. Here it is necessary to emphasize his toughness and diligence, as well as his willingness to sacrifice his own money and time not only for the popularization of Comenius's work in the framework of his more or less private museum or through articles in magazines and daily newspapers, but also for his efforts to contribute to the research. Although he was not successful in finding new, serious facts on foreign journeys, he has a great merit on the creating connections between places connected with Comenius' life. With his immense efforts, he created an international communication network of personal contacts (including Leszno and Naarden) that facilitated the development of the museum and enabled him to actively participate in comeniological discussions. He created a strong tradition in Přerov, followed by other museum administrators and employees (Hýbl, 2009: 20-28). Slaměník was involved extensively in commemorative practice, which represents a form of a transfer of the arising discipline to the broader cultural memory of the then Czech society (Řezníková, 2014: 183). In addition, he has great merit in creating a research base for comeniologists, as he has collected some unique rare prints in his collections that were not in any of the libraries in the Czech lands at the time and wrote several articles on these (Němečková, 1962: 48-52).

Being a Catholic, Slaměník related to Comenius as to a moral, supraconfessional Christian idol, Czech patriot, educational reformer and thinker. His approach reflects the social model of the last quarter of the 19th century when festivities (the celebrations in 1871, 1892, the monument unveiling in Přerov, etc.) and the formation of national cultural memory were ascribed great significance, which is why it was important for him to experience the *genius loci* of the places linked to Comenius' life and his narration is often tinged with emotions, at times almost with pathos, which to some extent belonged to the common period discourse.

His texts published in instalments in magazines and newspapers were a mixture of travel, historic and expert information, which now makes it more complicated to understand them. However, it was a widespread style in this period. On the other hand, at the time when they were written, travelling abroad was not common and it was not accessible to all social classes, so his articles were very beneficial to readers. Thanks to his travels, in particular to Naarden in the Netherlands and Leszno in Poland, the Czech Lands got a chance to see important documents and facts that were complemented by knowledgeable comments. Nowadays, Slaměník's articles are above all evidence of the comeniological discourse of the period, a testimony to his effort to gain new knowledge and share it with as many people as possible.

It is true that modern expert comeniological texts are free from pathos, but subjective emotional feelings are still an important aspect not only of popularization, but also own motivation of researcher to engage in a particular topic. Comeniological memorial institutions (museums, monuments, memorials, etc.) hold a firm place in the network of tourist destinations, and they are a very effective tool for making Comenius' legacy known. Even comeniologists find the places linked to Comenius' life magically alluring. For instance, the discovery of the foundations of the centre of the Unity of the Brethren excavated by archaeologists during research in 2012–2013 in Přerov awakened an unusual level of expert as well as lay public interest, mainly because of the possibility to touch the places where Comenius once walked. A paved route between the church and the school of the Unity of Brethren caught so much attention that it became part of the new monument in Přerov. Thanks to discoveries like this, visitors can have a more profound experience when visiting the exposition of the Comenius Museum in Přerov, particularly the reconstructed classroom from the 17th century.

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