

FRANTIŠEK KOŽÍK

THE SORROWFUL AND HEROIC
LIFE
OF JOHN AMOS COMENIUS

P R A G U E

State Educational Publishing House

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THE SORROWFUL AND HEROIC LIFE OF
JOHN AMOS COMENIUS

Translated by Edith Pargeter
Illustrated, jacket designed and prepared
by Cyril Bouda

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RETURN of the STUDENT

He closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath.

Yes, even if he had been led here blindfold he would surely have recognised this moment, this place. The sombre murmuring of the fir-trees had not changed, the moss yielded as resiliently as ever under his feet, here and there the tender green of spring foliage burst forth ardently as of old over the black of the branches - - And surely the very breath of the earth was suddenly as warm as the exhalation of a newly-sliced loaf of homebaked bread. And John Amos felt with conviction: I'm home! The fatigue of the last hours of his journey fell from him, and with it the tension which had been his companion along the frontier pathways, and with relief he embraced only the blessed awareness of homecoming. Everything around him was suddenly endowed with a more piercing sweetness by its dear familiarity, and the welcome it held out to him.

He threw down his bag and stick, and sank down

on an outcrop of granite, worn out with travel and emotion. He heard the pounding of his own heart.

To what was he returning? What had he left behind? What was it that was advancing to meet him?

His native Moravia was still a long way off, beyond Prague, beyond the whole of Bohemia, but it had sent its messengers all this way to meet him, the little blue eyes of hepatica under the crooked branches of the blackthorn trees, foaming with clusters of white stars. When he breathed their bitter-sweet scent, it was as though he leaned down to his childhood. He wanted to call it back to him; but as he gazed upon it, it seemed to him that it was suddenly rapt away from him and swallowed up in the smoke of fires.

Don't be ungrateful, John Amos! Those earliest years to which memory can carry you back were beautiful, gilded with the love and care of your parents. Everybody in Uherský Brod had respected his father, a man who brought to his household firm discipline, but also loving kindness, such as the members of the Community of Czech Brethren practise towards one another. But a malevolent fate lay in ambush to strike like lightning at this idyllic life. Amos could never forget the moment when the coffins sank into the damp, deep pits in the ceme-

tery, sealing away from him the bodies of his father and mother. Not both on the same day, but certainly so closely did one follow the other that the two moments had become indissolubly fused in his recollection. He was scarcely twelve years old at the time. They preached to him of the will of God, and Christian resignation, but he fled far from them all, into the ditch beyond the ramparts, to pour out his grief and bitterness there in passionate weeping, to confide at least to the earth, the deaf, mute and yet compassionate earth, his boyish sorrow and his defiance.

They separated him from his sisters, and his aunt took him into her household in Strážnice. But the boy could not overcome his grief for his lost home. They sent him to school again; in a single class the teacher struggled with pupils of various ages, taught them to read and reckon a little, but for the most part sang psalms with them. And out of John's very sorrow and loneliness, and out of his rebellion against the unhappiness that dogged him, there was born in him a longing to know as much as he possibly could about the world, perhaps so that he might be able to understand why man must undergo such suffering, and discover whether it was possible to master and forget it. But in this school the road to learning was long and thorny. How much

better could his father answer his curious questions! Here it seemed rather that they were resolved to beat out of the pupils all desire for education.

The orphaned John did not remain long in Strážnice. The Emperor Rudolf, who took the side of the Catholics, was at that time involved in a dispute with his brother Matthias, who for the time being saw fit to appear as the protector of the Protestants. Out of Hungary there swept down upon Moravia the gangs of Stepan Bockay, seeking to draw the Moravian nobility into an alliance with them; with the troops of soldiers came also bands of robbers, hired by merchants to pillage. And Moravia, once called the Paradise garden, was laid waste to lament and mourn, stripped by their brutal hands. Sad rumours of burned and deserted villages flew through the countryside, and all of them were true. One day a battalion of Hungarian soldiers appeared suddenly on the ramparts of Strážnice, and stormed the terrified town. Through the forests by night the fourteen-year-old John fled far away, to Nivnice, out of range of the glare of burning Strážnice.

He grieved not only for his tortured homeland, but for his own frustrated longings, for without books and without a school he could be of little profit indeed to the people of his own blood and

his own tongue. But fortunately the Community of Czech Brethren had long since departed from the requirements laid down by Peter Chelčický on the poverty and simplicity of thought of its members; its doctrine, stemming rather from the teaching of Master John Hus, attracted even the nobility, who ardently desired the reform of the church, and that necessitated taking part in public life, and making provision for the education of the young. The cruel persecution under which this most peaceable of the evangelical churches had suffered had taught its members to extend to one another devoted help. And as the talent of the orphan from Nivnice did not escape the notice of the clergy and leaders of the Community -- whose patron in Moravia was the powerful Charles the elder, of Žerotín -- his future was decided. He passed from the hands of the village trustees into the Latin school at Přerov. There he distinguished himself, and became the favourite pupil of Bishop Lanecius, of the Brotherhood, who singled him out for honour by promising, half in jest and half in earnest, that later he would give him in marriage his own little daughter Johanna. John Amos knew that if he wanted to get to know the world, to come to terms with it, and to master the finest thought yet set down by man, he must have a sound knowledge of the Latin lan-

guage. He became well acquainted with Cicero, Ovid and Virgil. And because he was one of the best pupils, because misfortune had made him grave, and discontent with his fate ardent for knowledge, the Community sent him, with certain other young men, to continue their higher studies in Herborn, where under the rule of the House of Orange the Academy was famous for its good repute, excellent discipline, and distinguished professors.

Comenius was dependent on the benefactions of the Community; the Hungarian raiders had burned the farm his father had bequeathed to him, which up to now had provided him with the fees for his education. Indeed he possessed nothing except the few books he had managed to save, and the firm determination to make grateful repayment to those who had placed their trust in his conscientiousness.

It was in this resolve that he had left his native land, four years ago.

Now he was returning. He stood before those who had sent him forth. He could look them in the face with a clear conscience, for when he looked back over the years spent in a foreign land he knew that he had made use of every day, and never allowed himself to fall into negligence or indolence.

Though there prevailed in Herborn a greater gravity than in other universities, there were opportunities enough for diversion, distractions enough to excite young creatures longing for freedom, love and song. No, John Amos was no recluse, and neither his friends from Bohemia nor the foreign students who had become his friends could complain that he had shown any want of sociability. It was repulsive to him to learn by rote, or preen himself on propositions which frequently cancelled one another out; he never made use of what he had learned from books for his own exaltation, and he could speak on all branches of learning simply and wittily. Often he ended by doubting what others accepted without a thought.

From time to time he himself pondered what it could be that inspired so much disquiet in his spirit. Certain of his acquaintances were truly religious; they accepted their lives as though they had been laid down in Holy Writ, and their humility was at the same time pride, since they presumed that it was precisely on their account that everything happened as it did happen. Others were silent and industrious; they listened to lectures, they could recite rules, they amassed knowledge. But he -- John Amos -- could not accept life without question, like the former, or study, like the latter. His spirit was

uneasy, and drove him to consider, to distrust, to ponder.

Sometimes he had wonderful visions. When he went to bed, his mind inflamed by reading, he dreamed that the world lay before him like a plain drowned in darkness. Yet he saw life upon it. People knew their own daily tasks, their crafts, their earthly drudgery, and did not raise their eyes from these. But from time to time it seemed as though a light blazed up among them. There rose up a man who turned his inspired face to heaven, and irradiated by a beam of light from above, spoke out and showed to men a road hitherto hidden in darkness. And there were other men, too, who turned their faces upward only to attempt to wrest from heaven the secret of the stars, arming their eyes with the lenses of the telescope; others mixed liquids in retorts, others made man himself their study, exploring his body, probing his veins, others only leaned their foreheads in their hands and meditated, torturing their brains with thought. These men, entering into combat with many and diverse mysteries, discovered and showed to humanity new pathways. And in measure as their number grew, so did light and clarity increase upon the darkened world.

John Amos was curious about everything. He

listened to the lectures of young Professor Alsted not as to a teacher, but as to a man and a friend, who advised him how best to comprehend the whole of knowledge, and combine it into a system. From him he learned to reinforce his memory with extracts from books. Ardently he collected reports of all the new discoveries brought to light by the various sciences, and news of how men were drawing nearer to the solution of the mysteries which nature concealed from them. He studied Aristotle, and made himself familiar with all that the physics of the time offered, and he excelled in debate. Constantly discontented with the tedious and inconsistent methods of teaching, he reached out eagerly to the writings of the German reformer Ratke, who had put forward a demand for teaching in the mother tongue. To John Amos this confirmed what he himself had often thought.

In Herborn they had often talked about relations between the churches, and about political evolution. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the two great camps, Catholic and Protestant, stood poised against each other in ever sharper opposition; and though it seemed, after two hundred years of hostility, that it was high time for reconciliation, and on both sides the number of those who wished for peace was increasing, yet there were other in-

terests at stake, the interests of kings, princes, and wealthy families; and so the forces regrouped, and formed alliances, and it seemed that the two camps would never settle their differences except by force of arms. Painfully dissatisfied with a state of affairs which gave the dominance to the sword, and not to right thought, John Amos searched the Bible with Professor Piscator for prophecies, and accepted as comfort his teacher's preaching about the early coming of Christ's kingdom on earth, and the thousand-year empire of the just.

For these reasons John Amos thought with growing anxiety of his homeland.

When he had set out for Herborn it had seemed that the so-called 'Letter of Majesty' of the Emperor Rudolf would mean a compromise between the two camps in the Czech Lands. But almost before John Amos had enrolled in the university, reports of new dissensions were arriving from Prague. The war-like bishop Leopold of Passau invaded Bohemia with his army, at the Emperor's instigation. He was forced to withdraw, but when Rudolf was succeeded by Matthias, the new emperor exerted all his power, in the teeth of all his promises, to secure the sovereignty of the Czech lands to the Hapsburgs. The Czech nobility saw in Protestantism the guarantee of their privileges and freedoms.