

Comenius (1592-1670)

Do you have a reading book? I am sure it has pictures in it. Who was the first person to put pictures into children's reading books? His name was Jan Amos Comenius. Here is his story.



The Thirty Years War was a terrible time. Do you remember the story of how it started? We learned about it the lesson for 21st June. It began in a country called Bohemia. The people of Bohemia were not allowed to worship freely. They were told how to worship. They were told what to believe. Who told them? The Roman Catholic Church told them. But they had been taught by the Reformer John Hus. Hus read the Bible. He taught the Bohemians read it too. They would not follow their Catholic rulers. They wanted to follow the Bible. In the end there was war. The Bohemians were defeated in battle. Bohemia's brave leaders were cruelly put to death. Then the victors began to kill the people. Thousands and thousands of them ran away in terror. They ran to other parts of Europe. People who have to run away are called refugees. The whole of Europe became swallowed up in war. There were many refugees. Jan Amos Comenius lived in this terrible time. He lived in Bohemia.

Comenius thought hard about how children should be taught. He experimented with ways of teaching. He wrote his ideas down. People all over Europe came to know of his ideas. They tried them out for themselves. Often children learned better because of Comenius's ideas. He had the idea of pictures to help children learn Latin. He used the idea in teaching other languages too. People still remember Comenius's ideas today.

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Comenius was a godly man. He belonged to a group of Christians. They were called the Bohemian Brothers. He was minister of the church in Fulneck in Bohemia. But he did not think the Bohemians did right. “It is wrong to fight a war against our oppressors,” he said.

Then came the defeat of the Bohemians. When the killing began, Spanish soldiers came to Fulneck. They took everything and killed the people cruelly. Comenius and his family and many others ran away. They were refugees. They ran to a castle. The castle belonged to Charles of Žerotín. Charles of Žerotín was a powerful man. At first he was able to keep Comenius and his friends safe. The picture at the top of this page shows his castle. Today it is a museum. It is the Comenius Museum.

In the end Comenius and the Bohemian Brothers had to run away from the castle too. They had to leave Bohemia. They were refugees again. The journey was terribly hard. There was not enough food. They could not find good shelter. The refugees lost everything they had. Comenius's wife and

child died because of the hardship.

At last they found a safe place in Poland. The town was called Leszno. Here Comenius became Director of the School. Many more Christians came to live in Leszno. They joined the Bohemian Brothers. These Christian refugees were skilful. Leszno flourished. There were many weavers. There were many printers. Now Comenius began to travel. He was well known for his ideas about teaching now. He came to England. He travelled to Sweden.

Then there was persecution again. "Leszno is a nest of heretics," said the Polish rulers. What did they mean? They meant the refugees! They meant the Bohemian Brothers! They hated them because they believed the Bible. "We will burn this nest!" they said. They burnt Leszno down. Comenius lost everything again. He had been busy writing. Over many years he had learned much about teaching children. He wrote it all down. He got it ready to be printed. But it was burned with everything else. Comenius was a refugee once more.

Then the Thirty Years War came to an end. The Catholic rulers made an agreement with the Protestant rulers. It was called the Peace of Westphalia. But what about the Bohemian Brothers? The Catholics did not want them. The Protestants did not want them either. What could they do?

Comenius wrote to them all. "I know you have lost everything," he said, "but trust in God. If you are a minister, preach in whatever church will allow you. Tell the people to love and care for one another." But what could the congregations of the Bohemian Brethren do? "Try to find a good church," said Comenius. "There are still some who follow God. Pray for those who persecute you. Pray that God will open their eyes." God will

not destroy without building again. He makes all things new. God knows what He is doing. We must trust Him to pull down and to build up as He will. He does not do these things for no purpose. Something great lies hidden under it all.”

In the end, Comenius went to Amsterdam. Amsterdam is in the Netherlands. Here he was free. He wrote many books about teaching. He was always looking for ways to send out the gospel. He knew it was the only way for people to have peace. He worked on Bible translation too. He worked on a Turkish translation of the Bible. The Turks are Islamic. They do not know about the Lord Jesus. Comenius wanted them to hear the gospel.

Comenius wrote other books too. He wanted Christians not to quarrel. His last book was called the "One Thing Needful". “The world is like a maze,” he wrote, “there is only one way out. Leave all needless things. Christ is what you need.” He



thought Christians would quarrel less if they listened to God's Word rather than man's word. “In church,” he wrote, “the words of men are usually heard more than the Word of God. But people need to hear from God's Word that they must be born again.”

Today Bohemia is part of the Czech Republic. Czech people still love to remember Comenius.