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Czechoslovakia, Yesterday and To-day

“ JINDRA,” a Czech.

(As Huss was a disciple of Wycliffe this appropriately follows Mr. Cope's article).

IN September 1938, when all Czech citizens were under arms, the fateful decision of Munich took place. This gave Czechoslovakia two alternatives, either to fight by herself against overpowering odds, or to submit to Hitler. In the course of history the Czechs have often fought valiantly for liberty, but this time the whole future existence of the people was at stake.

I can still hear to-day the fateful words of the Czech radio announcer, when his breaking voice pronounced the last decision of Dr. Beneš, the President. It was indeed a difficult and historic decision, but Dr. Beneš realized that battle would be hopeless, whereas the preservation of the people was of supreme importance for they would eventually regain their independence.

Before we enter further upon the consequences of the overthrow, I would like to look back upon the varied history of Bohemia and Moravia and their religious development. This testifies amply to a nation well deserving freedom and independence.

By the 9th and 10th century, during the times of Good King Wenceslas (a figure well known in England!) the Czech people were converted to Christianity. The Faith gained ground rapidly, and the Czech Church made every effort to spread the gospel amongst the people and to further the cause by means of culture and the blameless life of the clergy.

When in the 14th and 15th century disorder, culminating in the papal schism, occurred in the Catholic Church, the

Czech Catholics were the first to try to reconstitute the Church.

Wycliffe in England worked first for the reformation of the Church. His influence and teachings gave Jan Huss, who was Wycliffe's pupil at Oxford, the basis for his own doctrines. They were introduced into the Prague University and from there were spread amongst the Czechs. Although Wycliffe's doctrines were accepted in many countries, nowhere did they find more followers than in Bohemia, where the ground was already prepared for a reformatory movement.

The spiritual leader of these reforms was Huss. He became not only for the Czechs, but also for the rest of the world the symbol of the unassailable warrior for Divine truth. His motto, inscribed on the walls of many Czech towns became the watchword of the nation: "Pravda vítězí" "Truth prevails." Thomas Masaryk also took it for his slogan in recent years and it has since been quoted by English politicians. After the martyrdom of Huss the ensuing Hussite wars were the most famous historical events in Czech history. They gave a vivid example of the ability of a people to prevail against force, when it is aflame with the Christian creed.

This convinced pure Christianity, the legacy of the Hussite times, prepared the ground for further development. Christian teaching was already so deeply rooted on this relatively small territory in the 16th century that various sects existed peacefully side by side. Apart from the Catholics there were the Lutherans, the previous Hussite Church, and the new Protestant Church. This last dated from the famous times of the Hussites, and was called the "Bohemian Brotherhood." They started in a small way in the 15th century, but soon became the recognized proclaimers of the Christian faith; so that by the 16th century they attained to the spiritual leadership of the Czech people. Later some of their most outstanding members also filled the leading political positions in the Czech state.

Religious freedom was dealt a heavy blow after the defeat on the White Mountain in 1620. It meant the end of this freedom, the centuries of struggle seemed in vain. All progress stopped abruptly and the nation, more than 80 per cent. Protestant, was subjected to terrible persecutions. In consequence the first big emigration occurred, and thousands

of the Bohemian Brethren sought refuge and new freedom in Prussia, Poland and the Netherlands. Amongst these emigrants was the famous Jan Amos Komensky. He was a truly great thinker, philosopher and teacher, one of the outstanding personalities of the 17th century. As the last bishop of the Bohemian Brotherhood, he wandered for more than 40 years in strange lands, hoping to liberate his own country from the domination of Austria. But whilst seeking allies for this cause, he turned all his thoughts to the future education of his Bohemian countrymen. He hoped to employ all the systems which he had successfully used in strange lands for the betterment of his native country. But death overtook him abroad.

We have chosen the following quotation, picked at random, as an example of his high ideals: "Not only the children of the rich and noble, but all without difference, highborn or lowborn, rich and poor alike should be sent to school in all cities, towns, and villages. And this because, those who were born human, were so born mainly for the purpose of becoming intelligent creatures, showing their resemblance to the Creator."

Apart from Komenský little is known of the religious activities abroad of individual priests. Only the work of the Moravian Brethren who represented a part of the Bohemian Brethren and had settled in Prussia achieved noticeable success in a revival of the Brotherhood Movement. They founded a religious community in Hernhut and adopted the name of Moravian Brethren, as a large number of them came from Moravia. Since that time they have done wonderful missionary work throughout the world.

Until towards the end of the 18th century, in theory only Catholicism existed in Bohemia: in fact, however, there were continual attempts to revive Protestantism but they were always rigorously suppressed.

Gradually the attitude of the Catholic Church of Bohemia altered, contrary to that of the other Church bodies. It became involved in the Nationalist movement and began to play an important part in the unification of the Czech nation. And as at the time of Josef II other Church bodies were tolerated, so the repressed sympathies of the people revived and a large part of the Czech nation returned to Protestantism. In spite of great difficulties with the Hapsburgs and

the existing laws, the Protestants fought their way into the leading ranks of Czech politicians.

The political and religious development of the country reached its high water mark after the World War. The Czech nation, united with the Slovaks, became a separate country. As a result of the hard struggles of Professor Thomas Masaryk and his righthand man Dr. Eduard Beneš an independent democratic state, Czechoslovakia, was evolved. All forms of religious development flourished anew. Co-operation between the State and the Church was re-affirmed. The State helped the Church not a little in its work of reconstruction, and the old ideals which had been the foundation of the former Czech freedom were aroused.

The teaching which Jan Huss centuries before had brought to Bohemia from England found another prophet in Komensky : and Komensky's ideals were brought to fruition through Masaryk who was also a protestant. These three names—Huss, Komensky and Masaryk—epitomize the whole of Czech culture.

The importance of Komensky to Masaryk is seen in all his writings. He regards Komensky as an apostle to the nation : " To us Komensky must be more than he has hitherto been. We can recognize in him not only the philosophy of the Bohemian Brotherhood, but the philosophy of the Bohemian people, and of Bohemian history as well. In him we see not only an upright Bohemian, than whom there can be no better but also a Bohemian working for the whole of mankind. He writes in Bohemian, he writes in Latin—for the smaller circle of his people, for the large circle of the universe. . . . In Komensky we have the best example of real, sublime, ardent love for one's country based on a general view of life, well considered and confirmed. The love for his own country and his own nation, however, does not prevent him working to unite all men as brothers."

Masaryk's basic idea for the formation of the Czech State was the thought that although the Czechs and Slovaks form only a small nation, yet this fact must be balanced by religious and moral depths, by spiritual development and a high standard of culture. These particular qualities represent the significance of the Czech people. In this he reverted to the old principles of the Czech Reformation which he

perfected with his own views of humanity and pacifism. All Church bodies had complete religious freedom, both the Catholic Church which included over 70 per cent. of the population as also the smallest sects numbering only a few hundred followers. In addition there was no antisemitism; and the Jews enjoyed complete religious freedom. So passed the ideal years of Czechoslovak independence. It was however impossible to celebrate the 20th anniversary with unrestrained rejoicing and enthusiasm for already the dark clouds of Nazi-ism were lowering over the peaceful woods and fields of Czechoslovakia. And then took place those events which I have already sketched at the beginning.

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I thought it necessary to give this short historical review of a people who for centuries have struggled for the freedom of their country and their religion. Only after this introduction can one understand the terrible catastrophe which has burst upon the Czech Nation and realize what a cultural inheritance has been destroyed and how many years the clock has been put back. The Czechs are a sorely tried people. But they have never lost their capacity for resistance, and we Czechs are convinced that the present situation is only a passing one.

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With the end of the political independence of Czechoslovakia religious toleration ceased automatically. The Nazis were very conscious of the fact that the Czech clergy as well as the Czech teachers represented a strong opposition to their rule.

For this reason immediately after their occupation the persecution of the Church began. Hitler came to Czechoslovakia already well schooled in brutality, by many years' experience. It was immediately enacted that the Church should become subject to the Nazi authorities. Outspoken preaching was forbidden: and all clergy brought under the strict control of the Gestapo, the German Secret Police. This applied equally to the Catholic and the Protestant Churches.

In spite of this pressure the Church began to strengthen her activities. The Clergy preached emphatically in her

sermons of national tradition, culture and the Christian life in all churches and open religious meetings. They encouraged the people to stand firm and not to give up hope. But this courage of the spiritual leaders was and still is being rigorously punished. One of the most terrible incidents which overtook the Czechoslovak Church was the manner in which Dean Soucek was arrested in Kladno. The Gestapo suspected him of having influenced the inhabitants of that town against the Nazis. Troops occupied the church and arrested the Dean who had just finished a service. In the most cruel manner he was dragged through the town, past weeping women and children, to the headquarters of the Gestapo. From there he was taken to Germany and put into the concentration camp at Dachau ; and there he remains.

This is only one of many incidents, but my pen is loth to describe what revolts Christian feelings and what one would prefer not to believe.

The Czechoslovak Church had to suffer most, because it was the Church which had been constituted at the time of the founding of Czechoslovakia. It consisted of the Lutheran church, the Bohemian Brotherhood, the Calvinists and several smaller sects. The very name of this democratic, religious organization was a thorn in the side of the Nazis. They have already asked it to change its name. An alteration or dissolution of her constitution has also been demanded. This would rob a million people of their spiritual home, and make them an easy prey to the godless hands of the Nazis.

The Church has a hard struggle to face. The vital question arises, whether it is possible to be a true Christian under Nazi rule, and to fulfill God's will without becoming a victim of their drastic treatment. This applies particularly to the Protestant and Free churches. Their highest duty is the preaching of God's Word and the interpretation of living Christianity. But how can Christians fulfill these duties when they are forbidden to apply the teaching of the Scriptures to every-day life : when they are compelled to preach in the presence of a Gestapo agent, who weighs up every word and has the priest arrested or not according to his mood. Thus a few weeks ago two young priests in southern Bohemia who had studied in England were arrested in their pulpits. It is a daily occurrence for priests to appear before the Gestapo, after holding a service.

But news which has reached us from neutral sources tells how the Czechs are more than ever seeking comfort in prayer, and spiritual support through faith. The organ of one former Czechoslovak Party, even though controlled as all other papers by the German censorship, says: "The Nation is returning more than ever before to religion and to the Church. After deep disappointments in political life the people take refuge in God. The working class which showed after the World War a certain indifference to religion, feels to-day the value of faith for each individual, and for the strengthening of the national spirit." The organ of another Party discusses the general unity of the Czechoslovak people, emphasizing that a country once famous for its religious controversies is to-day free from any religious division. "The solidarity of all faith, without exception, puts the interests of the Nation and its future above all. They forget all that separated them before."

When after the bloody revolts in November the Nazis ordered the closing of all Czech Universities the theological faculties were also involved, and therefore the Hussite-Protestant faculty. Where previously the knowledge of God was taught now the Gestapo has set up its offices, according to the latest reports.

All this was a further cruel blow for the Church, because she is now faced with the impossibility of educating the rising generation of ministers. This lack will soon make itself felt because of the brutal methods with which the Nazis treat the clergy.

The persecution of the Church by the Nazis does not only concern their spiritual liberty, but also their material possessions. Quite a considerable number of estates belonging to the Church have been confiscated, divided into lots and given to the German farmers from South Tyrol and Poland. So far particularly valuable treasures known to belong to the church have not yet been confiscated, but the Nazis have made a record of these.

It is impossible to-day to publish a list of those Protestant members of the Church who have been arrested or who languish in the concentration camps in Germany. In their own interest this must be kept silent. Some priests whose position was particularly dangerous have left the country: but most of them are persevering, full of self-denial for the

sake of Czechoslovakia. They are spiritual refuges for the Czech people in these trying days, and help them to remain firm in hope.

Before the worst persecution started some of the prominent personalities of Protestantism succeeded in fleeing across the frontier. In danger of death and through terrible privations Senator Vojta Beneš, the brother of Dr. Eduard Beneš managed to escape to Poland. From there via France and England he reached America. Switzerland gave shelter to Dr. J. L. Hromadka, professor of Divinity at the Hussite Charles University, and now he also has arrived in America with Dr. J. B. Kozak and Dr. O. Odložilik. All these eminent Protestants have given their services to Dr. Beneš. As in the last war when Thomas Masaryk was the leading spirit of the movement for liberation of the Czech Nation, so we find to-day prominent Czech Protestants in the front line of the struggle against Nazi-ism. They are better able than anybody to speak, for they well know what deep ethical and spiritual changes the Czech people have had to endure.

All of us to-day stand under arms against Nazi-ism. Czechoslovakia was not the last victim. Poland too had to suffer brutality, cruelty, everything of which only the Germans are capable, trampling humanity and Christian love in the mire.

This reminds me of a quotation from Komensky in his *Testament of a Dying Mother of the Brotherhood*, whose prophetic sense has already once come true: "I also trust in God, that after the tempest of wrath, which was brought upon our heads by our sins, the rule of thy affairs will return to thee, O thou people of Bohemia. . . . Live, thou nation consecrated to God; die not. May thy men be without numbers. Bless, O Lord, its gallantry and upon the toil of its hands look with favour. Break the loins of its foes and those who hate it, so they rise no more. . . ."

May the Lord above make these words come true once again. . . .