



# Remembering Dagmar Čapková

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I must have met Dagmar Čapková for the first time at the International Conference on the History of Education that I had organized at Sèvres, near Paris, in September 1981, as the second conference of the International Society for the History of Education (ESCHE), at the occasion of the first centenary of the Jules Ferry acts on national education in France. By then, I had, in fact, already quit my research job at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris (France), because shortly before I had been appointed assistant professor of social history at the Catholic University of Tilburg in my native Netherlands.

It is not for nothing that I mention here the secular laws and the Catholic university, because the attitude towards religion has secretly determined our intellectual relation. Soon, I recognized in Dagmar a very fine, cultivated and learned scholar of a period in which religion and society always were at an intense but difficult interplay. Her personal modesty has probably prevented her from being celebrated during her lifetime according to her scholarly and personal merits, in the noisy Areopagus of ever-ambitious male historians. But she has made me discover the person, the life, the publications and the richness of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the great Moravian intellectual Jan Amos Komenský, in the Netherlands better known by his Latin name Comenius, and, at the same time, appreciate the complex and passionate history of his homeland. All the papers from Dagmar I have heard and read in my life turn around Comenius' unique commitment towards a peaceful, culturally enhanced and spiritually rich coexistence in a borderless, universal community of women and men of different religious persuasions. Against the background of Comenius' firm belief in the Savior of all mankind, we find everywhere his conviction that a liberal education embedded in universal values is able to transcend borders, helping us to overcome the barriers and obstacles which both our nature and society have erected between us.

I was immediately struck by Dagmar's active commitment to our common European heritage, beyond the traditional limits of Western Europe typical for the intellectual world that by then was still mine. Through our correspondence and the reading of her work, as well as that of the authors she quoted and recommended, I soon discovered the exemplary value and the enduring significance of the work of Comenius, as well as the meanings, both tragic and hopeful, of the events of his personal life. Unlike most of my colleagues in Europe, I shared with Comenius his path through life in one of the most tolerant states of Europe during his lifetime: the Dutch



Republic, at present the Netherlands. As a young historian of Dutch descent, with close family from my fathers' side living in Naarden, I was of course vaguely aware of Comenius' tomb in that town, but I didn't yet know the Comenius mausoleum that the Czech government had created there before the Second World War and that was renovated, together with the adjacent museum, on Comenius' 400<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1992. At that time, Comenius meant little more to me than the thousands of immigrant intellectuals who had flooded into Holland, at that time a paradise for refugees.

My encounter with Dagmar changed everything, and her silently persistent but persuasive attitude, as well as her scholarship, would have a decisive influence on my new interest in Comenius. I became familiar with his life and work through Dagmar's tireless efforts to replace him at the center of his period in the history of education on the European continent. Some of my Dutch colleagues, such as Nicolette Mout and Wim Rood in their learned studies, and F.R.J. Knetsch in his 1970 inaugural lecture at Groningen, had discovered different aspects of his life and works well before me. However, thanks to Dagmar I could follow my own way, focusing on education and tolerance as the two key values of the Dutch Golden Age to which Comenius had contributed so much, probably without realizing himself how well his thought and the course of his life suited the most open spirits of that Dutch society, torn between a rigid Calvinism and a shameless, self-interested secularism. The most lucid among them were eager to find a man who, by his scholarship and social intelligence, was able to advance the peace of mankind without neglecting his faith in God, and they found this in Comenius.

I am not a specialist of Comenian studies, but as a cultural historian and a scholar in the history of education I appreciate him greatly, quote his works, and occasionally am able to devote an article to him in his Dutch context, for example *Comenius et les Pays-Bas*, in the Parisian *Lettre internationale* (no. 35, winter 1992/93, pp. 44–51), also translated into Czech by Jiří Beneš (*Komenský v Holandsku*, Czech edition of the *Lettre internationale* no. 8, 1992/93, pp. 52–55). This article, and *Comenius et les Pays-Bas: une interpretation*, in Hana Voisine-Jechova (ed.), *La visualisation des choses et la conception philosophique du monde dans l'oeuvre de Comenius. Actes du colloque international des 18–20 mars 1992* (Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris 1994, pp. 19–39) owe much to Dagmar. Lately, I honored Comenius with a biographical article in the francophone *Dictionnaire des Pays-Bas au Siècle d'Or* (Éditions CNRS, Paris 2018, pp. 151–153) that I have edited with Catherine Secretan, and that we hope to see soon translated into Dutch and English.

As such, I felt very honored when Dagmar asked me, in the early nineties, to co-edit with her the ten essays by some of the best Comenius scholars, including herself, which she published in 1992 in a special issue of the journal *Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education* (vol. 28, 1992, no. 2, pp. 175–333), for which she also served on the international editorial board. And I am very proud of having received in 2003, during a solemn session of the Comenius Foundation in his burial town of Naarden, the Comenius medal with his motto 'Omnes omnia omnino' for my scholarly work, which I consider a true honor and recognition for both of us, my learned friend Dagmar and me.

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