

## The Development of Relations to Education in the 17th Century in the Context of Burgher Testaments (the Example of New Prague Town)

### **Abstract**

Early modern testaments represent a unique source of information about many areas of life at a given historical period. They are frequently used in various areas of historical research, including Czech historiography and its new cultural history. Although the cultural history covers many topics, surprisingly, the field of education has been somewhat forgotten. The testaments, which unite the official information and personal testimonies, provide a unique chance to see the attitude of the society towards education in a historical context of a certain era.

The testaments might become important especially when researching those periods of the development of scholarly systems and education that have been overlooked by historians, e.g. the development of town schools; respectively, the development of urban education in the period after the Battle of White Mountain (1620). The limited interest of historians has been caused mainly by the lack of information sources that could explain the changes in the organization of the newly formed confessional educational system after the Battle of White Mountain. These changes launched the process of recatholization of the Czech lands and naturally, they led to the significant transformation of the existing urban Utraquist confessional educational system. Most of the Czech urban population had been educated in this system during the pre-White Mountain era. However, this pre-1620 system fell apart and was replaced by a new Catholic educational system which was based on parish schools. The description of this new system and its use by often compulsorily recatholized burghers have been among the topics with very limited or no (in case of its use by recatholized urban population) historiographic coverage. Burgher testaments bring valuable information including personal testimonies of the burghers that could reflect also their relationship to education during the dynamic religion and political changes which occurred in the 17th century.

One of the few cities with well preserved 17th century burghers' testaments is the New Town of Prague. The uninterrupted series of the testaments found in the town books starts in 1586 and covers the entire 17th century. The testaments give us a unique opportunity to see and compare the relationship of the pre-White Mountain urban and dominantly Utraquist society to its educational system with the relationship of the Catholic urban society of the

post-White Mountain era. Overall, 733 testaments of the 17th century New Town citizens have been preserved. According to the 1980s standards of historiographical methodology, this number provides a representative sample for further research. At the same time, this information source and its existence were not connected with any particular social group of the urban population and thus we can get representative evidence about the full spectrum of the society. The testaments bring two kinds of information. The first kind of information includes the names of people (testators and others), the information about their real estate, personal movables, finances and other assets that were mentioned in the testament and that could be quantified. Personal decisions regarding the distribution of one's property at death to schools and educational institutions in general are also in this group. The second group of information is closely connected with the topic of the connotation changes in testaments and can be assessed only after an exhaustive historical and linguistic research which is not part of the thesis. The first group of information has been used for the purpose of this work, which is the research of the relationship of the New Town burghers to education in the 17th century, with a special respect to the legal and administrative framework of the testamentary practice in Prague that defined the predicative value of this information source.

284 testaments from the pre-White Mountain period (1600-1620) have been preserved in the New Town of Prague and 40 of them (14%) include directions regarding education. 449 testaments from the post-White Mountain period (1621-1700) have been found and 48 of them (11%) mention education. Based on the total number of the 17th century testaments that include references to education, it is possible to say that after 1620 the interest of urban population in education experienced a slight decline. The small decline was probably also caused by the slow, or delayed, impact of the significant social changes on people's minds and their decisions. It is also possible that the social changes had a full influence only on the following generations that had not had the experience with the previous Utraquist system.

The financial or other support for town schools within the city was noticed only in a very small number of testaments in both researched periods (pre and post-White Mountain). Similarly, the direct support for teachers or students at schools in the given territory was mentioned only marginally in the testaments. In case of low support for town schools, the reason can be seen in the fact that in the pre-White Mountain period the schools were financed primarily by cities, and it is also highly probable that burghers supported the schools directly during their lives when their children were studying there. In the post-White Mountain period, the bad situation in the town school network could also have a significant influence. On the other hand, the reasons for the lack of interest in direct financial support of

school teachers were quite different. The „rotation” of teachers at Latin town schools in the pre-1620 period prevented the society from establishing closer relationships with particular teachers. In the post-1620 period, the reason might be found in a bad state of affairs at urban, then fully catholicized, schools. This situation made the burghers support financially private teachers, preceptors, who, unlike town schools which did not have to guarantee quality, offered quality education and in many cases also served as an alternative to Catholic education for religious reasons. The support for students mentioned in the testaments was also quite specific. The testaments, even in the pre-1620 period, mentioned this as a charity which was not primarily focused on education and this form of support remained popular also after 1620.

The most significant change in the attitude towards education that can be observed in the testaments was the distribution of funds in the interest of Latin education of the testator's children and other relatives or friends. Latin education was „a standard“ for male burgher population regardless the social status of the family in the pre-1620 era, which is proved also by the testaments. In the post-1620 era, it was mainly higher and richer social class that expressed interest in Latin education which had become essential for the further university studies of their children. The lower number of bequests in support of both formal Latin and vocational education (trade and craft professions) in the post-1620 era, which were quite frequent before, shows a social differentiation in the burgher society and a different approach of individual social classes to education at that time. While in the pre-1620 era it had been normal for craftsmen, as well as for other members of the burgher society, to get Latin education, in the post-1620 era it was no longer popular as the Latin education became just a prerequisite for further university education (especially law education) which was important mainly to children from rich families.

Typical for the post-1620 testaments is the fact that the support for education was not specified in detail. Many testators mentioned the educational support for their children in general; which means that they did not specify either the vocational education or university studies. We can assume that the support referred mainly to elementary education; likely at one of the local parish schools which were all Latin at that time, and therefore there was no need for detailed instructions in the testaments.

The support for education with the reference to one's own or other children was mentioned in the testaments throughout the entire 17th century. In both researched periods the testators insisted on proper Christian education without defining the denomination. References to specific denominations can be found only in few post-1620 testaments,

especially from the first half of the 17th century when the recatholization had not been over yet. Clearly, in the dominantly Utraquist pre-1620 period as well as during the Catholic post-1620 times it was not necessary to state the denomination preference in education in one's will. In the later post-1620 period, even if the testator had requested for his/her children other education than the Catholic one, it could not have been stated in an official document, e.g. a testament.

The „indirect“ support for education, e.g. the donations of books or support for literary societies/fraternities, was part of the 17th century social life and as such it has been analyzed in this thesis. Literary societies (fraternities), also mentioned in the testaments, played an important role in the cultural life and they focused on further education of adults as well. Their character changed in the post-1620 period as they started to focus more on Catholicism and their educational impact was no longer important.

Many of the 17th century testaments mention inheritance of books and library collections, too. In fact, these are the most frequent bequests related to education in both periods. The testaments not only show the ownership of books but also the relationship of the testator to them and their actual use. Based on these testaments, we can judge the quality of education of both the testators and their heirs. The testators clearly preferred to keep their library collections as a whole also in further generations and preferably within the family. In the pre-1620 period, people inherited mainly general humanistic libraries while after 1620 we can see two kinds of collections. The first ones were larger subject-oriented professional collections, e.g. law books. The second group included individual books or smaller collections of mainly religious books, usually intended for various types of Catholic institutions. The first group shows the development of burghers' libraries in the 17th century when larger subject-oriented professional libraries replaced the general humanistic ones. This trend was in line with the university education of burghers' sons who sought later careers in state administration and therefore were in need of the law books. The second group relates to the religion of the post-1620 era and had no direct link to educational process.

The support for education in the testaments was limited to the male population throughout the entire 17th century. This can be explained by the male dominance in the Early New Age when women were not allowed to study. From the socio-economical view, the largest groups of burghers that focused on education in the testaments were the middle-class burghers, mainly craftsmen, real estate owners and people working in intellectual professions. The richest citizens did not mention education in their testaments. On the other hand, the lower-class burghers mentioned education in their testaments very often as education had

been important for better socio-economical status of their heirs. For the dominant middle-class society, education and investment in education was a standard at that time. However, the situation changed after 1620. The number of lower-class testators that supported education in their testaments decreased, while the number of the richest burghers that mentioned education in their testaments went up. This goes in line with the post-1620 development when education became important especially for richer citizens who purposely invested into their sons so they could establish careers in state administration later on.

The research of the 17th century New Town testaments confirmed that the testaments represent an important source of information about education and also about the relationship of the burgher society to education at a given period. They proved that education was important in both pre and post-1620 periods and that in each of those two periods different areas of education were supported by different social groups. These findings are in line with the social development in that time which was largely influenced by the Battle of White Mountain. On the other hand, the testaments provided information only about some of the changes that had taken place in the area of education and recorded them with certain delay (compared to the real time of the social and political changes in the 17th century). In spite of that, the testaments proved to be an important source of information in the research of burgher society and its attitude towards education.

**Keywords:**

Early Modern Period, Early Modern Age, pre-White Mountain period, post-White Mountain period, Czech lands, the New Town of Prague, burghers, burgher class, burgher society, denomination, education, education system, testaments