

...BRIDGES... Number 10, 2007: "Living History"

by Joyce Michael for the ECCB's American Working Group & the PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

Early one morning in June, I joined three colleagues from the national headquarters of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren for a journey to the eastern Moravian village of Kunwald. Although it was an unseasonably cool and rainy day, a number of other people had come to that remote location to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Unity of Brethren. The unique legacy of that literary and pacifistic branch of the Czech Reformation was quite evident in the diverse array of events that were featured during the morning hours. Visitors could listen to a lecture, watch a group of young folk dancers, or examine – and perhaps purchase – some of the attractive handcrafted items that were on display. They could also explore school rooms that demonstrated a contemporary application of Comenius' revolutionary understanding of teaching and learning, or look at an extensive display, which visually depicted the history of the Unity and documented that movement's continued existence as a "scattered seed" that is still seeking to cultivate its gracious vision of the Christian way throughout the world. It was also possible to enjoy the Czech equivalent of a high school band, and to taste a few of the traditional pastries which had been prepared for that festive day. Nor will I soon forget the warm welcome that was extended by the mayor of Kunwald and his wife. As I joined my colleagues in his office where packets of information about the ECCB were being assembled, a village official handed me a bag of treasures, which included decals, postcards, booklets, and even a commemorative shirt, mug, and bottle of wine. "I am not really an international guest," I objected. "But, we are glad that you are here," my friend affirmed.

I was also glad, as I made my way down the hill to the simple meeting house that has been reconstructed at the site where the Unity gathered for worship before being forced into exile or covert existence in 1621.

The festivities that took place in front of that building were also multi-sensory. Everyone who passed by the statue of Comenius at the top of the hill was given a special Czech pastry by young women clad in traditional garb. Standing below under rustling trees, we heard about the legacy of the "Brethren Tree," as Moderator Ruml creatively reflected on the symbolic significance of that massive linden. Colorful designs brightened the scene as a group from Kunwald's sister city in the USA presented the Czech mayor with a flag that been specially-designed to represent the town of Lititz Pennsylvania. The harmonic sounds produced by a bell choir from Zelow Poland, where a number of Czech exiles had settled in 1621, offered yet another sensory delight. Likewise, the burst of color supplied by the bright attire of the regional Catholic bishop paled in significance as he extended a word of apology – or more accurately – a word of regret for the brutal impact that the Counter-reformation had had on the Unity of Brethren. Although he said that he could not actually apologize for acts

which belonged to a time that was long since part, he knew that some reconciling words were in order and must be expressed.

However, nothing spoke to me as powerfully as did the presence of a man dressed in simple black and white clergy garb. This fascinating figure appeared before us playing a large, recorder-like instrument whose haunting tones called us to reverent silence. Those sounds were followed by resonant recitations of several passages from Comenius' writings. As I listened to the impressionist's deep – and sometimes fiery – voice, I had a sense that I almost knew how the members of the Unity felt upon hearing Comenius' compelling words when he was their bishop. It was as if I had been transported to another time that day, and, in fact, I had a comparable experience on November 14 when the same man began the opening session of an international conference on Comenius with a similar performance. Thanks to that artist and to the 200 scholars from 70 nations who gathered in Prague to reflect on Comenius' life and work, the concluding words of the conference surely are true. "Comenius lives!" in the minds and hearts of all who dare to seek for, and cultivate, the unified approach to the whole of life, which is the distinctive legacy of the final bishop of the Unity.