

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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A Shimmer of Hope: Joseph II's Tolerance Act of 1781

When Joseph II of Austria issued a tolerance act on October 13, 1781 hope rose in the Moravian Church that freedom had finally come for the Protestants in the "lands of the fathers". Years of suppression had caused Protestants to leave the Habsburg empire for other parts of Europe. In 1722 Protestant refugees from Moravia had founded Herrnhut and started the Renewed Moravian Church that would incorporate the traditions of the old Unitas Fratrum.

Joseph II came to the throne after the death of his mother, Maria Theresa, in the year 1780. Joseph, who considered himself an Enlightened ruler, initiated a radical change from the politics of his mother. He abolished serfdom and introduced equality of taxes, so that nobles, bourgeois and peasants were taxed according to the same principles. Joseph made sure that everyone was tried equally in court, regardless of a person's class. He also introduced freedom of press, and in 1781 he ordered toleration of religion.

For many years the Roman Catholic church had been the only religion in the lands under Habsburg rule. A period of toleration for Protestants in Bohemia had come to an end with the Battle at the White Mountain in 1620. From then on Protestantism had to go underground. Many people conformed to the official church, others continued to profess their religion in secret or they left the country. In Poland, for example, a Polish branch of the Unitas Fratrum developed, which continued to exist until World War II. In the 1730s Protestants from Salzburg emigrated to other parts of Europe and to America, causing a sensation among Protestants everywhere. Herrnhut was one of the places where Protestants from Bohemia and Moravia found refuge in the 18th century. Whereas anyone wanting to join the Moravian Church could only be admitted with approval from the Lot, refugees from the "land of the fathers" were accepted without asking the Lot.

The Moravian Church never gave up its hope to reestablish the Unity in Bohemia. The congregation Gnadefeld in Upper Silesia, close to the Moravian border, was founded in 1780 as a base for supporting Protestantism in these lands. Events gained momentum when Joseph II proclaimed new liberties. Protestants from Moravia came to Gnadefeld to ask for advice about whether they should apply for a church building.

However, it soon became clear that the Tolerance Act did not guarantee freedom for all denominations - only

for the Lutherans and the Reformed. From his enlightened standpoint Joseph II considered other groups, such as the Hussites and those who claimed to belong to the Unity of the Brethren, too ignorant to be tolerated under the 1781 act. The Unity Elders in Berthelsdorf cautioned the Brethren in Gnadefeld and in other congregations not to give any advice to Protestants from Bohemia and Moravia because their involvement could be interpreted as meddling by the Moravian Church in the internal religious affairs of the Habsburg Empire.

Joseph II died prematurely in 1790. His radical reforms had alienated many groups within the Habsburg Empire from his policies. Religious freedom for all Protestants did not come about until a century later. In 1869 the General Synod of the Moravian Church decided to re-establish the Unitas Fratrum in the Czech lands. Finally, in 1880, an imperial edict recognized the Moravian Church in the Austrian Empire.

Sources: Minutes Unity Elders' Conference, Dec. 31 1781, Febr. 12, 27 and March 2 1782. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, 191.

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