

This Month in Moravian History

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Arvid Gradin's Visit to Constantinople, 1740

275 years ago Swedish Moravian Arvid Gradin arrived in Constantinople. After a journey of more than four months, Gradin reached his destination on March 24, 1740. In Constantinople he was to conduct talks with the Greek Orthodox Church in order to obtain official recognition for the Moravian Church.

Moravians believed their church was a continuation of the Unity of Brethren in Bohemia. Because Bohemia was Christianized in the ninth century by the Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius, they believed Czech Christianity was marked by Greek Orthodoxy rather than by Roman Catholicism. According to this 18th-century historical interpretation Moravians claimed to be part of an ancient tradition, going back to the Greek Orthodox Church. They thought recognition by the Greek Patriarch that Moravians were descendants of the Greek Church would help Moravian mission work, especially in Russia. It would also improve their standing among other churches.

In 1739 Moravians began planning to send a delegate to the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). Arvid Gradin was selected for this assignment. Gradin was born in 1704 in the Dalarna region of Sweden. During his studies at the University of Uppsala he became involved with Pietist groups, and after reading about Herrnhut he traveled there in 1738. Gradin did not return but joined the Moravians.

On November 12, 1739, Gradin began his journey to Constantinople. He traveled through the Netherlands and France to Marseille where he took a ship to Constantinople. Gradin used the first four weeks after his arrival to get to know the foreign culture and to establish connections. An important contact was Samuel, Archbishop and Metropolitan of Derkos, who would



prove indispensable to Gradin during the following weeks. Through the help of Samuel, Gradin was admitted to the palace of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on April 26, 1740.

Gradin's visit occurred during the first term of office of Neophytos VI (1734-1740). Neophytos invited Gradin to sit down next to him; as a special sign of respect, Gradin was offered coffee and incense. Despite the respect and support Gradin received, negotiations did not turn out as Gradin had hoped. Under the given circumstances in the Ottoman Empire the Greek church leaders were unable to publicly support any efforts for the conversion of people to Christianity; nor did they fully understand the Moravians' reasoning about the connection of the community of Herrnhut with the Greek Church. The Patriarch wrote a letter of recommendation for the Moravian Church but Gradin was disappointed with its content. The letter did not explicitly support Moravian mission work. Although the letter acknowledged the Greek roots of the Moravians, it did not seem to recognize them as a separate religious body but suggested "unity and community" with the Orthodox Church.

Gradin lost his composure and returned the letter to Neophytos for revision but the Patriarch was unable to help him. Samuel of Derkos was equally dismayed about Gradin's behavior. "Christ have mercy," he said when Gradin insisted on a revision of the letter of recommendation. When Gra-

din placed a gold coin in Samuel's hand as an attempt to cover the additional expenses for a new letter, the Metropolitan had enough of the Moravian and told him to leave.

For Zinzendorf the Greek letter of recommendation, despite its shortcomings, would have meant a welcome recognition of the Moravians as a legitimate church in the eastern tradition. Through several letters the count attempted to get Neophytos and Samuel to send him the letter that Gradin had returned. By then Neophytos was no longer in office; Samuel did not respond.

Later Moravian historiography and art presented Gradin's visit to Constantinople in a more favorable light. Moravian artist Haidt depicted the visit in a series of three images in the background of a painting of various people who were instrumental in securing the recognition of the Moravian Church by British Parliament in 1749. By placing these scenes of Gradin's audience with the Ecumenical Patriarch in the background of this painting, Haidt implied that the Greek Orthodox recognition of the Moravians formed the basis of the 1749 act of parliament.

Sources

Image: J. V. Haidt, *The Act of Parliament 1749*, detail (Moravian Archives, Bethlehem). Source: A. Manukyan, *Konstantinopel und Kairo* (Würzburg, 2010).

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