

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE CZECH EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *In this chapter we shall look at the development of the Czech education from the very beginning to the present.*

## 1. Introduction

In the Czech lands, education has always been greatly appreciated. Often, classes and groups of people who were not educated elsewhere could get education here (e. g. hussite women in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, general knowledge of reading and writing in the population in the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was notably higher than in the rest of Europe). The fact that the credit of education was high was reflected in the organisation of the school system: The first university was founded in 1348 and the technical university (Vysoké učení technické) in 1717. The compulsory education (then 6-year) was established by law in 1774 and from 1869 it was compulsory for 8 years.

Because a large part of Czech history is closely connected to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the school system of the Czech lands was for a long time quite similar to the Austrian one. After the break-up of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and creation of the Czechoslovakia in 1918, the school system of the Czech Republic was conjoined with the Slovak one. The Slovakian school system remains until today almost identical with the Czech, even though after the break-up of the federation, each of the two countries follows a slightly different path. Nevertheless, in the context of European integration all the school systems are coming closer to each other again. Let us now go back to the beginning.

## 2. Historical milestones

What is now the area of Czech Republic had been populated a very long time ago. After Celts and old Germans, in the times of the migration of nations, came the Slavs in the fifth century BC. The first schools are reported from the old Slavic settlements and from the times of the Great Moravia, in the times of christianisation of the population by Constantine and Methodius. The first school mentioned in writing is the Budeč where the children of the nobility were educated in religious studies, and reading and writing in Latin. An important school (St. Vitus's cathedral school) was established in 973 with the Prague bishopric. By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, quality schools were commonly established by the Benedictine monasteries.

During the middle ages, new type of schools begun to be established. These were founded by towns, which were flourishing due to the fast development of craft and trade. In these schools, which were similar to those founded by monasteries, children of rich families were taught by priests. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century such schools were to be found in all towns of the Bohemian kingdom.

The economic development that came after the crusades in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century made it possible for universities to be founded. These were independent of the church and rulers and international from the very beginning. The students could freely move from one university to another. The study language was Latin. Quite similar tendencies can be seen even today, can they not? In 1206 the Sorbonne was founded in Paris. Charles IV, the King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, following this example, established the first university in the central

Europe, which is known today as the Charles University in Prague. The graduates from the Charles University helped the development of the lower and higher schools in towns, which prepared their pupils for working in crafts and trade or university studies. In 14<sup>th</sup> century the church found themselves in a crisis. In 1409 all the German professors and students decided to leave the university to go to Leipzig. Jan Hus became the rector of the Charles University. He was later burned to death by a council in Constance in 1415, because he tried to reform the church. After the Hussite wars, the *Unitas Fratrum* (Brethren Unity) was established by Petr Chelčický, which founded many new schools that were of higher quality than the Catholic schools. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century the Charles University opened for poor people. An order that had a major influence on the Czech education (especially higher education) were the Jesuits, who were given the university in 1622. The most prominent personality in the Czech education lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was the famous teacher of nations, Johann Amos Comenius. He created the first united, modern and humanistic educational system. Because Comenius was born on March 28, 1592, this day is celebrated as the teachers' day.

In 1773 the Jesuitic order was abolished. Marie Therese, a Habsburg ruler, initiated a number of reforms in 1774 that were to enhance the economy of the state. Compulsory education was established in a unified 3-stage schooling system. A lot of vocational schools were established. The first military academy was founded in 1752. From 1770 a new type of business academies were introduced. Teachers were educated in so-called *Preparandia*, which were constituted with regular schools. The monarchy's language policy leads to Germanisation of the Czech people, which then resulted in the so-called National Renaissance, the aim of which was to save the Czech language and ensure proper national education. Similar tendencies are to be found all over Europe at that time. In reaction to the National Renaissance, the church and monarchy strengthened their positions. In 1886, the system was divided once again into the basic stage (up to 14 years of age) and the secondary school with school leaving exam (so-called *maturita*), which was subdivided into comprehensive middle school (*Gymnázium*) and middle technical school (*Reálné Gymnázium*). Teachers were educated in 4-year teaching institutes. The school inspection shifted from the church onto the school inspectors. The compulsory education was prolonged to 8 years in length in 1869. The responsibility was on the state, financing laid on towns. After the First World War, in 1918, independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. One of the primary problems was creating a unified education system and compensating for the cultural differences between the advanced Czech lands, Slovakia and a part of Ukraine that belonged to the new republic. In the twenties, many laws were passed, but the structure of schooling remained unchanged. Only, it was necessary to establish the schooling system in Slovakia and Transcarpathia.

The twenties and thirties of the twentieth century meant quick development of reform pedagogy, which tried to realise a reform of life in schools, education content, unified secondary schools and balanced approach between comprehensive and vocational education. This was also the time of many important Czech educational theorists and active teachers. There were also new universities founded in the new republic, for example the Masaryk University in Brno (1919), which was named after the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. At that time, Czechoslovakia belonged among nine of the most advanced countries in the world.

In 1933 Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. In 1938 he decided to occupy Czechoslovakia (Protectorate *Böhmen und Mähren*) and the Second World War began. The country was again heavily Germanised. German language became the most important subject in school (it took one fifth of all school time). The textbooks were modified in the context of Nazi ideology. In 1939, all the universities were closed down and were turned into barracks and military prisons. Many secondary schools (mainly *gymnasiums*) were closed down. New

schools were established to educate new Nazi elite. Many young people forced to hard labour in German factories. After the war, the school system as well as the infrastructure were all in ruins. There was a lack of teachers, for many died to concentration camps. New school buildings had to be build; new books had to be written, new curricula planned. The universities were reopened in 1945.

In 1945, university education of teachers was established by the law. One year later new students were accepted to the newly founded pedagogical faculty of the Masaryk University. It was the fifth faculty of the Brno university.

In 1948, the political situation was given a new direction towards the socialism and communism. All schools became state-centred and the church lost its influence. The elementary education was compulsory, unified, free and designed for nine years. Kindergartens, which had been established as early as in the thirties, were incorporated into the educational system, although they were not compulsory. The unified school system (1948 – 1953) consisted of: first stage (1. – 5. grade), second stage (6. – 9. grade) and third stage (10. – 12. grade). The third stage included 4-year grammar schools (gymnasiums), 4-year technical academies, and 2/3-year vocational schools. The first and second stage were later conjoined into a unified basic school, which covered the compulsory education (8/9 years). The curriculum was modified to fit the ideology, it was unified, compulsory and nature science and work oriented.

The “Velvet Revolution”, which came in 1989, made it possible for the basic principles of education in the Czech lands to change from communist to democracy-based. In the nineties of the twentieth century many quick reforms were introduced and the school system was diversified, decentralised, democratised and de-ideologised. The nineties are therefore remembered as extraordinary time of many changes that took place in a very short period of time.

### **3. Discussion**

- Did you have any expectations about history of education in the Czech Republic?
- Which part of the history of Czech education do you find the most interesting? Is there anything that surprised you?
- What did you know about the socialistic Czechoslovakia in connection with education?
- Have your views and opinions on Czech schooling changed since you started studying in the Czech Republic?
- Can you name any similar tendencies in Europe to those mentioned in the text?
- Do you now what the oldest universities in Europe are and when they were founded?
- Are there any similarities between the history of education in the Czech lands and in your country?
- What are the milestones of the history of education in your country?
- Comenius was a great teacher. He travelled to many countries. Did he happen to visit your country? What did he do there?
- Does your country have a similar personality? Who was it and what did they achieve?