



**The prelude to the re-unveiling of the
“Comenius Stone”
at Valeriusplein Amsterdam, opposite
“Het Amsterdams Lyceum”,
on March 12, 2018**

by Jan C. Henneman and Pieter J. Goedhart



The prelude to the re-unveiling of “Comenius Stone” at Valeriusplein Amsterdam, opposite “Het Amsterdams Lyceum”, March 12th 2018.

Dear guests,

Commemorating Comenius in The Netherlands dates back to 1892, both in Amsterdam and in Naarden. But our story starts in Rotterdam, a bit later at the very beginning of the First World War in October 1914.

Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk came from Prague to Rotterdam in the neutral Netherlands to share his vision on post war Central Europe with the British historian Robert Seton-Watson. Their secret meetings were the start of Masaryk's effort to get international support for his mission to strive for an independent Czechoslovakia. “Testament of Comenius” Masaryk called his mission.

Independence was proclaimed four years later in October 1918, exactly 100 years ago. It might have been with this “Testament of Comenius” in mind, that Czechoslovak expats in Amsterdam wrote Masaryk as their country's first president a letter in 1919. They solicited his support to commemorate independence with a memorial for Comenius.

We found their letter in the presidential archive at Prague Castle as part of a more than 300 pages file covering papers relating to Comenius and The Netherlands in the period 1918-1970. Their request got follow-up both in Amsterdam and in Naarden at the commemoration in 1920 of the 250th anniversary of his death in Amsterdam and his burial in Naarden.

Naarden received the bust of Comenius made by Strachovsky, which you can still see in the garden of the Comenius Museum and Mausoleum.

The documents in the presidential archive showed us how the Czechoslovak Minister of Education assisted personally at the ceremonial departure of the first stone for a Comenius Memorial at Valeriusplein. The stone came from the region where Comenius was born and left the Masaryk Railway Station in Prague by train to Amsterdam as diplomatic freight. His Deputy, Professor Frantisek Drtina, was present at the ceremonial unveiling of the stone at Valeriusplein on November 15th, 1920, the very date of Comenius' death.

Furthermore, we found some telegrams between President Masaryk and Mr Tellegen, the Mayor of Amsterdam. The Mayor wrote the President on behalf of the Municipal Council that it had been a privilege for their forefathers to have granted asylum to Comenius in their city.

We were thrilled by these documents and went to Valeriusplein at the beginning of last year. We found the stone in front of “Het Amsterdams Lyceum” next to where many bicycles were parked, but it was badly damaged. We wondered whether we could receive some information at “Het Amsterdams Lyceum” and asked to see the then Rector Mr Schoonveld.

He told us that the stone was damaged during municipal works some twenty years ago and that Valeriusplein was soon to be reconstructed. And he didn't know what was to happen with the stone.

Rather provocatively, we asked Mr Schoonveld whether the stone would not be better off at the Comenius Museum in Naarden. No way, he answered categorically, the stone should stay at Valeriusplein.

With his strong advice in mind we decided to write a letter to the Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam. Could the City of Amsterdam not consider restoring the stone in view of the 350th anniversary of the death of Comenius in 2020 and of the centenary of its solemn unveiling?

As we didn't receive a reaction to our letter, I took the liberty to address Deputy Mayor Mrs Kajsa Ollongren at the opening of an exposition in the Amsterdam Hermitage. She answered me that it might be a matter for Stadsdeel Zuid.

When I told the story of the stone to my student time friend Mr Bob Last, who happens to live in Valeriusstraat and whose children went to Het Amsterdams Lyceum, he sent me the email addresses of Mrs Esther Smit - gebiedsmakelaar at Stadsdeel Zuid - and of Mr Max de Jong - director of the Real Estate Company involved in the restructuring of Valeriusplein.

We are very grateful for your advice, Bob. We contacted both of them and received a very cooperative response. We learned some weeks later that works at Valeriusplein would start already in June 2017 and that the stone would be lifted for its restoration.

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You can imagine how pleased we were to see the lifting of the stone and at the same time we were a bit deceived. According to the documents from the presidential archive a copper box was placed below the stone in 1920, containing some official documents. There was, however, no sign of this box. So far, its whereabouts remain a mystery. We hope that Stadsdeel Zuid will receive some indications in response to the flyer which was distributed for today's ceremony.

Some months went by before Rashna Kadier from Stadsdeel Zuid called us to inform us that the stone was to be restored by the beginning of March 2018. In other words, more than two years ahead of the date we suggested to the Deputy Mayor. We are grateful to Rashna and her colleague Philia Scheuerman not only for having done everything to get the stone restored, but also for organizing today's event, which was by far not their usual work.

We wish to compliment you, Mr Sebastiaan Capel, that Stadsdeel Zuid decided to restore the stone and we are glad to inform you that De Jong Vastgoed will finance a plaque explaining the history of the stone and protecting it against falling into oblivion.

Again, we went to "Het Amsterdams Lyceum". This time, we met the new Rector, Mr Harold Tennekes. Like your predecessor, Harold, you understood the historic

significance of the stone. You immediately offered to be host for today's meeting in "Het Amsterdams Lyceum".

You followed in the hospitality steps of the first Rector, Mr Gunning, who invited the guests into the Lyceum following the unveiling ceremony in 1920. We greatly appreciate how you involved students in the organisation of the programme, fully in line with the tradition of "Het Amsterdams Lyceum".

The stone was the first stone, or, as President Masaryk wrote to Mayor Tellegen "la pierre fondamentale" for a Comenius Memorial at Valeriusplein. Documents in the presidential archive at Prague Castle and newspaper articles in the nineteen twenties, thirties and even in the nineteen fifties point at plans for a Comenius memorial, but it was never realised.

We hope that the restoration of the stone will challenge further research into the history of the intended memorial. It should be documented in one way or the other in the Stadsarchief of Amsterdam and at Delpher, the digitalised newspaper site of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague. Copies of relevant documents from the presidential archive in Prague can be studied in the library of the Comenius Museum in Naarden.

Finally, our great appreciation, Mr Sebastiaan Capel and Mr Harold Tennekes, for jointly hosting the ceremony today, marking the restoration of the monumental Comenius stone at its historic place at Valeriusplein opposite "Het Amsterdams Lyceum". Great appreciation also, Miss Regent, for the active participation of het Dagelijks Bestuur and of your other colleague students.

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Today is the start of a week with several Comenius related events: On Thursday March 15th, the exposition called:

"The Heritage of Comenius: the birth of Czechoslovakia" will be opened at the Comenius Museum in Naarden, and, two days later, on Saturday March 17th, the annual commemoration of the birthday of Comenius will take place.

Former Minister of Justice Mr Ernst Hirsch Ballin - also former student at "Het Amsterdams Lyceum" - will give the 2018 Comenius Lecture at the Grote Kerk of Naarden, and Minister of State Mr Herman Tjeenk Willink will receive this year the annual Comenius Award. We brought some copies of the Comenius Commemoration Day programme and we hope to see all of you in Naarden, this week or at any other moment.

Thank you for your attention.

Pieter J. Goedhart and

Jan C. Henneman

