

In Search of Racovia

PHILLIP HEWETT

The Racovian Catechism of 1605 probably ranks with Channing's Baltimore Sermon of 1819 as one of the two most influential Unitarian documents ever written. It engendered furious debate for centuries. But whereas Channing's sermon is kept in print by the UUA, the English translation of the Racovian Catechism is now available only from the Biblical Unitarians of Indianapolis rather than to any member-group of ICUU.¹ They too claim to be legitimate inheritors of the Racovian tradition, just as in Poland in recent years there have been several rival groups making the same claim. It is like the recurrent phenomenon in hereditary monarchies, that of the Pretender who maintains that he should be the rightful monarch, but history has passed him by and recognized another line of descent. One could get involved in interminable debates over the rights and wrongs of such situations.

The Racovian Catechism: why was it so called? It took its name from Racovia, the Latin form of Raków, the little Polish town in which it was published. Raków at that time could fairly be called the Unitarian capital of the world, with printing presses that churned out hundreds of titles and an academy that drew hundreds of students from all over Europe. It had been founded by a group of Unitarians in 1569 as a Utopian intentional community, a New Jerusalem, and it continued to flourish until it was overthrown by the forces of religious and political reaction in 1638.

I first visited Raków in the 400th anniversary year of its founding, 1969. At that time there were few signs of its illustrious past. It was just like scores of other small Polish towns, with dirt streets lined with small and shabby houses, no piped water or sewerage. The only building of note was the baroque church, which bore above its western door a large plaque, now blackened with age, proclaiming in almost illegible Latin that it was consecrated in 1655 to the glory of God the One in Three after the eternal banishment from this place of the impious Arians and the restoration of Roman Catholic worship. It ended with an injunction to pray for the good shepherd Bishop Zadzik who had brought about this happy condition in which the Son and the Holy Spirit, who had wickedly been regarded as inferior to the Father, could now be adored in their equal majesty.

Earl Morse Wilbur

On that first visit I made no contact with anyone. The priest, with whom I had supposed I might be able to have a few words, was out of town and I had limited time, having driven up from Zakopane with plans to visit Socinus's last home in Lusławice on my way back. But at least I got a better impression than Earl Morse Wilbur did when he visited Raków in 1924. He had more trouble getting there than I did, to be sure: "to reach it", he wrote, "required twenty-five hours and my being up most of the night both going

and coming. My visit fell on a raw November day, with clouds hanging low.” This set the scene for a poor impression: “it is positively the wretchedest little town I have ever seen”, he wrote. “The houses were unspeakably squalid, and animals running at large in the muddy streets and market place gave the town the appearance of a huge barnyard or even pigsty. Half the inhabitants were Russian Jews of the most repulsive sort.” It was all too much for a Unitarian with a refined New England background. “As there was nothing more for me to see”, he continued, “and I could not bear to spend a whole dreary afternoon in so miserable a place, with no decent place even to eat in, I made my way to a neighboring village and threw myself upon the hospitality of a Polish gentleman to whom I had no introduction, but whose name I had casually learned at Kraków. I was at first received with civil reserve; but proverbial Polish hospitality did not fail. Simply to come as an American carries one far in Poland.”²

Despite Wilbur’s poor opinion of the Racovians of his day, he did share one characteristic with them -- a tendency to romantic exaggeration. Local folklore had preserved some remarkable tales about the Unitarians who had founded the place in the sixteenth century. They were supposed to have been gigantic figures, as proved, so it was claimed, by the bones that had been disinterred when their cemetery had come under the plough. As for Wilbur, I quote the following from a memorial article written after his death by Herbert McLachlan, himself a long-experienced historian. Wilbur had been telling him about what seems to have been the same visit to Raków, describing how he “made his way by car to a Polish nobleman’s home many miles on the far side of a forest. There he spent most of the night. Only one train a day went to Raców [*sic*], returning late in the evening, to catch which he travelled with armed guards on the wagon, and with torch-bearer to keep howling wolves at a respectful distance, occasionally shooting one of a pack in pursuit by way of delaying action.”³

Now from what I know of Raków and its environs, not to speak of what I know about wolves, I am prepared to say quite flatly that this never happened. Either Wilbur told his friend a tall tale, embroidering his already outlandish experience with a story from Polish folklore, or McLachlan in his recollection confused Wilbur’s telling such a story with his account of his own experiences. Wilbur’s tendency to exaggerate can be illustrated from other statements of his. Just as the later Racovians exaggerated the dimensions of its “Arian” founders, so Wilbur exaggerated the size of their town. In the article already quoted he described Raków in its heyday as “a prosperous city of thirty or forty thousand Socinians”. Prosperous indeed it was, but its inhabitants were not all Socinians, though most of them were. There were some Calvinists and Catholics, and enough Jews to have their own synagogue. But the worst gaffe was his statement about the size of the population. Even the lower of the two figures he gave would have made it the largest city in Poland apart from the great Baltic seaport of Gdansk. The national capital in Cracow had about 25,000 inhabitants at this time, Warsaw only about 10,000. One has to add that when he made the statement in question Wilbur was only in the early phase of his researches, and by the time he wrote his *magnum opus* twenty years later he had moderated his claim -- but not by very much. There he describes Raków as “an active little city of perhaps from 20,000 to 30,000” – a claim repeated by Charles Howe in his book *For Faith and Freedom*, making the claim even more egregious by omitting

Wilbur's qualifying "perhaps". As a matter of fact, it is possible, though Wilbur obviously didn't know this, to come to a reasonably close estimate of Raków's actual population on the basis of directories. Polish scholars who have studied them come up with an estimated population in the 1500 to 2000 range.⁴

Another illustration of Wilbur's fondness for big numbers which may be noted in passing is his statement that at least 50,000 Protestants were killed in the St Bartholomew's Eve massacres in France.⁵ In the absence of any head count, most historians are cagey about giving exact figures, but the general consensus is that the total was less than half Wilbur's figure. Norman Davies, who is a very competent historian, says it was around 20,000. Howe, again, just repeats Wilbur's exaggeration.

But let me return from Wilbur's experiences to my own. There had been some changes in the intervening period, not all of them for the better. The town sustained considerable damage during the Second World War and the Jewish population which had so shocked Wilbur had totally succumbed to Hitler's "final solution". The mayor now had an official car, the only one in town; likewise a telephone, the only other one being in the exchange. But I had seen the town in June sunshine rather than in November rain and was intrigued enough to want to go back for another visit. By dint of persistent inquiries I eventually established contact with a high school teacher in Raków, Tadeusz Bernat, who was the town historian. He spoke no English, but a Polish friend in Vancouver translated our correspondence and I began Polish lessons.

My interest in Raków represented a convergence of two fascinations that had developed over the years. During my teen-age years, the period in which I became a Unitarian, I had come under the spell of Utopian communities and immersed myself in the ideas of people like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. And I wanted to know more about the story of my new-found religious faith, so when the first of Wilbur's tomes appeared in 1945 I hastily obtained and devoured a copy. The fact that in its earliest years Raków had been intended as a Unitarian Utopian community proved an irresistible attraction. It came to a focus when the Minns Committee in Boston announced for the first time that they were inviting offers to deliver their lectures. I wrote a proposal for a series on "The Unitarian Search for Community in Sixteenth-Century Poland", and to my surprise mine was the proposal that was accepted for the following year. All I had at that point was a title, but the remuneration for the lectures would be on a scale that enabled me to plan a return visit to Raków and gather material.

So it came about that the summer of 1972 saw my wife Margaret and me back in Europe. We rented a car in Vienna and drove up to Poland. We knew there were no hotels in Raków, but intended to visit there from an overnight stay in the nearby city of Kielce. However, when we arrived there in the late afternoon we found a message for us from Mr Bernat asking us to come out to Raków that evening. So we went. We had no idea where he lived, but anticipated no problem in finding him in so small a town. We pulled up at the first house that had people standing outside it, and mustering my newly-acquired Polish I asked directions. They understood the question a lot better than I understood the answer, but fortunately it turned out that Mr Bernat's niece lived almost

next door. She was hastily summoned and offered to go with us and show us the way. It was no distance at all to the Rynek, the main square in the middle of the town, and Mr Bernat's house was at one corner. Our memory of the Rynek was of the same surface of sand and mud that it had had in Wilbur's day, but now it had been handsomely paved and the area in the middle turned into a park. These improvements had been carried out shortly after our previous visit to mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of the town by those Unitarians, and a stone monument placed there with an appropriate plaque. Mr Bernat had been one of the prime movers in all this, and was duly proud of what had been accomplished.

First Unitarians to stay in Raków since the seventeenth century

We were to be his guests overnight, which made us, as we worked out later, the first Unitarians to spend a night under a Raków roof since the expulsion of our predecessors in the seventeenth century. Mr Bernat was a bachelor, and his little house consisted of three rooms. The front room he had turned into a historical museum, with showcases containing a strange miscellany of local relics and some from further afield. Behind it lay the kitchen, which was also Mr Bernat's bedroom. Behind this again was a more spacious room that was to be ours for the night. It had been Mr Bernat's mother's room until her death a few months earlier, and he had just finished redecorating it prior to moving in himself. It was still totally devoid of furniture, but as soon as word went around that we would accept his invitation to stay a procession of neighbours arrived carrying all that was needed for our comfort. The communitarian spirit of Raków's earliest days still survived, and we were to experience many aspects of it. For instance, they wanted to be sure our car was safe for the night, and it was to be placed in a neighbour's back yard with a locked gate. To reach this yard we just walked through all the rooms of the owner's house, and this was obviously the usual custom.

The next twenty-four hours were packed with a week's worth of normal experiences. There was a party that evening, with much conviviality but only the rudiments of a common language in which to communicate. We were grateful after our travels when it broke up around 10:30, but it was not until the following morning that we found out why. Life in Raków began early – at about 4 a.m., to be precise. There was too much commotion outside to think of not getting up, especially after the church bells began to ring at five. There was no sign of Mr Bernat, but there was a cauldron of hot water on the stove for us. It soon transpired that he had been out shopping for food. Before seven o'clock we were at the town hall being introduced to the mayor. This was one of the few original Unitarian buildings still surviving; more recently, since the new municipal offices were built, it has become the town library. Then we were taken for a tour of the town, following which we were able to make our own contribution to the day's events. It so happened that Mr Bernat's niece, the same one as had shown us the way to his house, was to be married that day. We went to the civil wedding in the Town Hall, and then the bride went home to change for the church wedding. Our role was to drive her to the church, a splendid refinement in a town where the only other car was the official one for the mayor. We were of course invited afterwards to the reception. The only other outsider there was Professor Waław Urban, one of the Polish scholars of the

Radical Reformation, who had taken a great interest in the story of Raków, and was able to help us locate the background materials we were looking for. At the end of the evening we drove him back to Kielce, found a hotel room for ourselves and collapsed into bed.

This was the Unitarian return to Raków after more than three hundred years. Professor Urban commented that we had been received as “angels from heaven”, but would now have to come back to earth. One has to remember that this was seventeen years before the overthrow of communism in Poland, and that despite the celebrations three years earlier of the anniversary of the town’s founding by the Unitarians, local knowledge of just who those Unitarians were was still only beginning to establish itself. One thing they did know, though. Those early Unitarians had been apostles of tolerance, and that was enough to give us as their successors a hero’s welcome.

My Minns lectures a few months later covered only the first three years of Raków’s existence, as remarkable a story as will be found anywhere in our history. In the summer of 1569 the town came into being almost overnight, as the most radical Unitarians from all over Poland arrived to build their new Jerusalem. How they managed to get the construction done in that short period of time is a marvel, for they sat up half the night discussing the rights and wrongs of participation in political life, of capital punishment and war and communal ownership of property, as well as a wide range of theological subjects. Many features of their life and thought reminded me forcefully of the “fellowship mentality” that was in its heyday in North America at the time I was lecturing. A number of them, including some of the ministers, arrived at the view that ministers were unnecessary. The church did not need professional leadership. Let me quote from one chronicle of the period: “There were some who spoke against all forms of liturgy in religious services, pointing out that it was not right for any person to do or teach anything unless he had had a revelation from heaven.”⁶ Perhaps there is some echo of this spirit in Emerson’s Divinity School Address two and a half centuries later.

The “perpetual synod”

That three-year period in the early history of Raków came to be called the “perpetual synod”. In the words of one contemporary writer, “there was peace neither by day nor by night” as the arguments continued. At first they operated on the principle that every opinion was entitled to equal respect, whether based upon detailed study of the issues or simply thrown out off the top of someone’s head. Looking back a few years later, one disillusioned witness wrote to his fellow-participants: “You remember when you debased yourselves and gave up your ministries, expecting that the Lord God would inspire more worthy men, and you gave place to cobblers and tailors, highly praising their teaching and marvelling at it and saying that you learned more in one hour of listening to them than during a whole lifetime with books. You can hardly deny this. But being unable to stand it, you had to turn to books again and order the cobblers and millers to keep silence. For you saw what a confusion they made, of which you are ashamed to this day.”⁷

Freedom certainly ran riot during those early years. And paradoxically, at the same time many of them were trying to establish communal ownership of property along the lines already established among the Hutterites, oblivious to the fact that the Hutterites had succeeded in doing this only on the basis of a very tight discipline within which the established authorities were not to be questioned. Emissaries went back and forth between them and the Hutterite communities in Moravia, but the ultimate outcome was strongly worded mutual recriminations.

In the end, the Racovians discovered that their experiment in participatory democracy was degenerating into anarchy, and was beginning to discredit the entire movement. Under the firm leadership of a prominent apothecary, Szymon Ronemberg, they established a more conventional way of organizing themselves while preserving the rights of individual conscience they prized so highly.

This was the story I covered in those Minns lectures, using it as an illustration of the tension between the claims of individuality and those of community which has been a perennial feature of the Unitarian tradition. The lectures were not published, but manuscript copies circulated, and from time to time I was urged to make them available in more widely accessible form. But by now I was coming to the conclusion that the whole story of Raków needed to be told, not simply the first three years, instructive though those might be. To assemble the source materials for such a fuller treatment would take time, but the 400th anniversary of the publication in 1605 of the Racovian Catechism served as an incentive to get the story completed before then, and this was done.⁸

The two periods in Raków's history are so sharply differentiated that one Polish historian has asked, "Was there one Raków or two?"⁹ Almost thirty years separated the two periods of fame, and during that time nothing of any great consequence occurred there. Both the ultra-radicals and those who had been most disturbed by what they said and did had left, and were dispersed elsewhere in the vast territories that comprised the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But at the end of the century the estate on which the town lay changed hands. The original owner had not been a Unitarian, though his wife, who appears to have been the chief promoter of the original settlement, was. On his death the estate came into the possession of his son, Jakob Sienieński, who had himself recently become a Unitarian, perhaps influenced by having just acquired a Unitarian wife as well as a Unitarian mother. Sienieński deserves a more prominent place in our history than he has yet been given, for the revival of the movement not only in Raków but throughout the country owed much to him. He was one of the wealthiest and most powerful persons in Poland, and he dedicated these resources to the work of the churches. In particular, he was concerned to make Raków their chief centre.

By this time Faustus Socinus had become the most prominent spokesperson for Unitarianism, and had been resident in Poland for a couple of decades. Sieniński called him in for consultation, together with a number of other leading figures in the movement. They proceeded to work out plans for the new Raków. An academy was to be established there which would not only provide a first-class higher education, but also include a

seminary for ministerial students. A printing press was set up, and was soon producing scores of books to carry the Unitarian message all over Europe, using the international language of Latin. Latin was also the language required in the academy, which made it possible for foreign students to come without difficulty, and in fact they did so from many parts of Europe. Besides financing these ventures, Sienieński established a hospital and a public library in Raków, and promoted the town as a conference centre, with the result that within a few years nearly every Unitarian conference took place there. There were also seminars involving the leading thinkers in the movement, usually led by Socinus, and it was one of these that produced the famous Racovian Catechism. It expounded what was now generally coming to be called Socinian thinking, though Socinus himself died while it was still in preparation. For the remainder of the seventeenth century and for much of the eighteenth, its influence in spreading liberal religious thinking was profound.

All this had been possible because at a time when in many countries people were being burned at the stake for heresy, and wars of religion devastated much of the continent, Poland had been a bastion of religious liberty. During its so-called Golden Age in the sixteenth century, parliaments had successively reaffirmed this principle, and required an oath to uphold it from candidates for the throne. It obviously paid off in terms of peace and prosperity, and brought to the country skilled workers who were fleeing religious persecution elsewhere. However, as time went by the Roman Catholic Church, so long on the defensive, mustered its resources for the Counter-Reformation, spearheaded by the Jesuit order. It did not directly challenge the ordinances upholding religious liberty in Poland, but did its best to quietly circumvent them, and to stir up mob violence against heretics. Already before the turn of the century the Unitarian and Calvinist places of worship in Cracow had been burned down in a riot, and Socinus himself, then resident in the city, had narrowly escaped being lynched.

For a long time Raków seemed safe from attack, though throughout the country life was becoming more perilous for followers of its extreme form of heresy. Steadily the Catholics tightened their hold upon the political power structure and waited for an opportunity to strike. The Unitarians were particularly vulnerable because their thinking was as distasteful to the major Protestant bodies as it was to the Catholics, and they could therefore not expect support from that quarter.

Closure of the academy and persecution

The blow fell in 1638. Some teenagers from the Raków academy went for a walk outside the town, when they came upon a crucifix recently erected on land which was in disputed ownership between Sieniński and a Catholic neighbour. Ostensibly set there as an act of piety, it was obviously designed as a provocation, and in this it was successful. The boys threw stones at it and knocked it over. Nearby peasants saw it happen and reported it to the parish priest. He in turn informed the bishop, who took up the matter with the Senate, now totally under Catholic control. Despite his position in the life of the country, Sienieński had to submit to the indignity of swearing on oath that he had not instigated the offence. The Senate now proceeded to pass judgment. For this heinous

sacrilege, the academy was to be closed down and never reopened, the Raków press and all its publications were to be destroyed, and all the Unitarian inhabitants were to leave Raków within four weeks and never return.

The trial was depicted in a large painting commissioned by the bishop for the ceiling of one of the great rooms in his palace in Kielce, now a museum. The king sits in the centre, with the Catholic hierarchy and the nobility at his side, and the Unitarians stand before him awaiting the sentence. Some of them are identifiable from other paintings. There is now a very curious feature of the picture. Several years ago it was cleaned for the first time since it was put there, and in the course of the cleaning a number of disembodied heads appeared between the Unitarians and the king. Evidently the painter had originally placed them too close to the royal presence and had had to move them back, but the overlay he had used to cover his first effort did not survive the cleaning. Perhaps this could provide a theme for another of the legends with which this part of Poland is rife.

The expulsion of the Unitarians marked the end of the glory for the little town. Henceforward it had no greater claim to fame than hundreds of other places of similar size. And the end was fast approaching for the whole Unitarian movement in which it had so important a place. Twenty-two years later, after an unending series of disasters and privations, the Unitarians of the entire country were given a choice between three options. They could convert to the Catholic church, they could leave the country, or they could be executed. Many of the foremost leaders chose exile, some going to Transylvania, others heading west. Most of the rank and file had little opportunity to move, and went through the motions of converting to Catholicism. A specially created religious order spent the rest of the century vigilantly watching for signs that their conversion was not genuine.

This was the story I set out to tell in greater detail when I wrote *Racovia*. In preparation for this I went back to Raków twice, and returned again after its publication, taking a copy of the book to present to the mayor. He responded by putting on a civic dinner, and kept as a surprise until that took place the location for it. The municipality, since my previous visit, had done a fine job of restoring another of the original Unitarian buildings, which had been the minister's parsonage. The work had just been completed, and it is now the town museum. During the course of the evening there was another surprise. The school's music director had somewhere or other unearthed some authentic songs written by the seventeenth-century Racovian Unitarians, and a youth choir sang them. The tunes were simple enough for all of us to join in after a while, and the parish priest did so as heartily as anyone.

This positive recognition of the Racovian Unitarian legacy no doubt comes in part from the greater openness to diversity in our times. But I think there are also components within it that are characteristically Polish. For a century and a half after the destruction of the Unitarian movement there had been a determined attempt to eradicate all evidence that it had ever existed. But then came the eradication of the Polish state itself, for another century and a half carved up between rapacious neighbours. During the

nineteenth century, which was also the age of romanticism, Polish poets and novelists nostalgically recalled the Golden Age 300 years earlier, when their country had been the largest in Europe and one of the most powerful. The tradition of the Arians, as they had been popularly styled, was exhumed as part of this process, and although their theological writings were still not generally accessible and understood, they were placed in the pantheon of national heroes who had shown integrity and fortitude in defending the virtues of that tolerant age of national greatness. Here are a couple of verses by the mid-nineteenth century poet Maksymilian Zdułski written in praise of Faustus Socinus. I have translated them as literally as possible while trying to preserve the flavour of the original:

To heaven he went, in happiness to dwell;
Only contempt, alas!, he suffered here,
Though love of neighbour was in him sincere
And generous impulse lighted up his life.

O noble Faustus, rest in peaceful sleep.
Let not yourself be roused from blessed dream
By tears that flow for you from grateful hearts
Nor by disgrace for those who envy you.¹⁰

This idealization of Socinus and the so-called Arians culminated after the re-establishment of the Polish state in 1918, when the poet Emil Zegadłowicz set up a literary circle on what was reputed to be an Arian site and claimed that his own poetry grew (in his words) “from the trunk of revived Polish Arianism”.¹¹

It would be a great mistake to see in all this the beginnings of a new Unitarian movement in Poland. It was simply an attempt to appropriate what was seen as a significant feature of the national heritage by people who implicitly accepted also the more recent assumption that being Polish meant being Catholic. It is this same background, if I am not mistaken, that lies behind the welcome to Unitarians in present-day Raków, together with some hopes of encouraging tourist visits. Be this as it may, I have to testify that for me it has been a moving experience to walk where those distinguished predecessors walked before me.

¹ www.Biblicalunitarian.com.

² E.M. Wilbur: “The Last Socinian Church Visited” (*Christian Register*, June 25, 1925).

³ H. McLachlan: “Earl Morse Wilbur, Scholar and Traveller” (*Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, October 1956, p. 62).

⁴ E.M. Wilbur: *A History of Unitarianism*, Vol. I, p.450; Charles Howe: *For Faith and Freedom*, p. 82.

⁵ Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism*, Vol I, p. 363; Howe, op.cit., p. 69.

⁶ quoted by S. Tworek in S. Cynarski (ed.) : *Raków Ognisko Arianizmu* (Kraków, 1968).

⁷ Tworek, loc. cit. p. 63.

⁸ Phillip Hewett: *Racovia* (Providence, RI, Blackstone Editions, 2004 –available through Amazon.com).

⁹ J. Tazbir in Lech Szczucki (ed.): *Wokół Dziejów i Tradycji Arianizmu* (Warsaw, 1971).

¹⁰ K. Dobrowolski: “Trzej Poeci u Grobu Socyna” in *Reformacja w Polsce*, 1925.

¹¹ J. Krzyżanowski: *A History of Polish Literature*, (Warsaw, 1978) p. 591.