GEORG RITSCHEL, TEACHER AND CLERGYMAN:
A BOHEMIAN EXILE IN CROMWELL'S ENGLAND

Roger Howell

Georg Ritschel was one of the many Protestants who, after expulsion from Bohemia during the Thirty Years' War, found their way to England. Ritschel, whose father was a peasant, was born in Deutschkahn (Aussig district) in northern Bohemia on 13 February 1616. He enrolled in 1633 in the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Strassburg, which at this time was a favoured center of the Bohemian and Moravian Protestants. His education there, based entirely on Aristotelian physics, was to be reflected in all of his works. Ritschel appears to have stayed about seven years in Strassburg. After the re-Catholicizing of Bohemia it was impossible for Ritschel, who had opted for the Protestant faith, to return home. Whether or not he was in Oxford in 1641 is unclear, but it can be established that in 1641—42 he was in The Hague, Amsterdam and Leyden.

The encounter in 1642 with Johann Rave, who later helped establish the foundations of the Prussian school system, was important for the formulation of Ritschel's pedagogical method and the development of his concepts of education. Through Rave, Ritschel also came into contact with Comenius and Samuel Hartlib. He undertook for the former the task of working on the metaphysical sections of the draft of a didactic pansophical work projected by Comenius. This led Ritschel to England, and it can be proved that he was in Oxford in 1646. The completion of the metaphysical work was prevented by financial difficulties, on the one hand, and by a certain amount of ill-feeling between himself and Comenius, who found Ritschel's work too detailed and disorganized to serve as an introductory textbook.

Ritschel then took it upon himself to publish his work independently, under the title „Contemplationes Metaphysicae“. Although this work basically adhered to the Aristotelian tradition, Ritschel did not remain entirely unaffected by the new scientific thought of his day. His work appears to have attracted but little interest in England, but to have been enthusiastically received in Germany — an indication of his intellectual ties with the Continent.

To secure his livelihood, Ritschel accepted on 29 August 1648 the position of director of the Newcastle Grammar School, where he appears to have had great success. His religious views during this period are somewhat obscure.

In July 1657, Ritschel decided to leave the school and to accept a pastoral position in the nearby town of Hexham. There is no mention of his ever having been ordained as a Presbyterian or Anglican, but with the printing of his second work, „Dissertatio de Ceremonii Anglicanae“, he embraced, without any reservations, the Anglican Church. During his last years in Hexham until his death in 1683, Ritschel wrote a number of books which unfortunately have not been preserved.