

Epistle of 24th Central European Gathering of Friends from 10-13 September 2021 in Litomyšl, Czech Republic

This has been a very special weekend. The Central European Gathering of Quakers has finally managed to hold their annual meeting postponed several times since May 2020 because of Covid restrictions. For the first time ever it was a 'blended meeting' – and what a meeting it was with 13 Friends online from Portugal, Scotland, England, Poland, Czechia, Slovenia, Hungary, Latvia and the Ukraine. In person present there were nineteen Friends from Hungary, Poland, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany and the USA. We were blessed by the presence of three children, who enriched the gathering with music, singing and dancing as well as by actively participating in some of the sessions. We are grateful to our Friend Mirek Vrba who continued our new tradition of providing a children's programme during one of the mornings.

Based on popular demand and fond memories we met for the fourth time at the beautiful venue of the former Castle Brewery in the Czech town of Litomyšl, a UNESCO-World Heritage Site, thanks to its rich cultural tradition and architecture both ancient and modern – the outstanding composer Bedřich Smetana was born in an apartment in the very same building.

At a time of imposed physical distancing, it was a joy to experience the full participation of Friends far away blended with those in the room. We are grateful to Roman Branberger (in Portugal), Dominik Čejka (behind the control desk in the corner of the room) and EMES for their fantastic support in pioneering this venture.

Along those lines we had Michael Eccles, EMES Secretary, and Tim Gee, our next FWCC secretary join us for much of the sessions. And also Éva Tóth-Bumberak, seventh months into her pregnancy, and even Kasia Kaczmarkiewicz and Magda Gadomska from the train on their long journey back to northern Poland. What a treat (and feat).

We gathered around the theme of letting our lives speak, in the spirit of Christ's injunction in Matthew 5.16 that we let our light shine. We heard Arne Springorum speak about the unfolding civilizational and ecological crisis and his personal journey in the footsteps of our Quaker forebears who, as he reminded us eloquently, 'stepped up' to challenge slavery, as now Friends must confront our addiction to fossil fuels and unsustainable and harmful lifestyles.

Jasmine Piercy in her leading of right relationship challenged us to be aware of our connection to the animal world at the very basic level of things we possess and made out of animals. We were fascinated and humbled by her love-infused work of creating the Museum of Animal Stuff (www.mazingstuff.org) and felt that love in the story of our dear Friend Julia Ryberg and her parrot Arturo. Similarly throughout the gathering, Pedro, Ursel Kooke's canine companion delighted us with stretches and his good-humored presence and attentiveness.

In our Saturday sessions Cathy Butler also took up the theme of Quaker activism, particularly John Woolman and his contemporaries who stepped up and were instrumental in abolishing slavery. We were astonished and inspired to learn that they

also pioneered vegetarianism in our Western context and searched for right relationship with the indigenous peoples.

After deep discernment Friends of the Central European Gathering acknowledged the ecological and climate emergency and took a leap of faith and love by committing ourselves towards further decarbonising our personal lives and changing our ways to mitigate this emergency. This was documented in a minute and a separate epistle.

We are looking forward to welcome Friends from a far and close, virtually or physically present next year in Brno.

Arne Springorum and Gerry Turner