Jan Pindór

Jan Pindór was a Polish Lutheran minister who served a large Polish congregation in the town of Teschen in Austrian Silesia from 1877 to 1916. Among a number of important works which Pindór translated into Polish were Bunyan’s 
*Pilgrim’s Progress* and two books by Richard Baxter: *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* and *A Call to the Unconverted*. He also translated several of C.H. Spurgeon’s sermons, writing that the publication costs of some of these were paid for by “Charles Spurgeon’s widow.”

In 1892 Pindór spent three weeks in London, later recording his experiences there in two books. From his numerous fascinating observations the following have been selected as being of particular interest.

Everywhere in London the streets are very clean. On one occasion as I was making my way somewhere I was surprised to see something written in chalk on the paving stones. I thought to myself: “The street urchins in London are the same as in Teschen and Warsaw – always scribbling some piece of nonsense.” But on coming closer I wanted to read the notice, as it was in fact inscribed in beautiful handwriting. Its message was this: “Commit thy way unto the Lord. Psalm 37:5.” A few steps further on I came across a second inscription: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? Psalm 139:7.” In Silesia we are not accustomed to seeing the words of Scripture used in this way. We think that religion and the Bible are part of our “Sunday best” – just for Sundays and only to take to church. In England they think differently. They say: “Just as the body needs food every day and wherever we are, so too the soul is always in need of the word of God.” And people have to be given it, even if in a message chalked on the street.

In Silesia people decorate their rooms with pictures. Sometimes you enter a home to find it adorned with beautiful paintings depicting religious or historical scenes, but more often there is a variety of kitsch which probably came from a market somewhere. In England I also sometimes found pictures in people’s homes, but these usually consisted of words taken from Scripture, beautifully ornamented with flowers and palm branches, framed and hanging on the wall. People particularly like to hang such texts near their bed, so that when they get up or go to bed they have the word of God near them. It is true that you do slowly get used to this sight, just as we get used to our pictures and often end up not noticing them. But I was seeing these things for the first time, and they made a singularly strong impression on me. In England the streets and the walls proclaim the word of God.

The streets also proclaim it in another way. On Saturday afternoon the week’s work comes to an end and the calm of the Sabbath begins. At around four or five o’clock on Saturday afternoon groups of people appear on the streets, standing and singing religious songs. Most of them are girls and young people in general; I did not see many older people among them. The men wear caps similar to the hats worn by Prussian soldiers. They wear a brown armband bearing the letters “S.A.,” and they have an emblem consisting of the same letters on their chest. The girls are in ordinary clothes, apart from a large black straw bonnet with a red hatband and a bow on their chest. They stand in the streets, sing religious songs and take turns to speak, calling on passers-by to seek Christ and His salvation.
Who are these young people in uniform? They are members of the Salvation Army. In a sprawling city like London there are people of every kind. Alongside the decent and respectable there are also a great many of the disadvantaged and deprived, who eke out a precarious existence on the city's streets. These people may have had a rather difficult background, without any kind of religious upbringing. They do not attend church unless encouraged to do so and they do not care for their souls, but the gift of the Gospel is also for them. Christ our Lord came to seek and to save that which was lost. As well as permanent male and female members, the ranks of the Army also number those who serve only on Saturdays and Sundays. They include for the most part pious and virtuous housemaids, chambermaids and menservants. During the week they work in offices, shops and warehouses and in numerous forms of service; but on Saturday afternoons and Sundays they put on the uniform of the Salvation Army and go and preach the Gospel, each as best they can. It certainly cannot be denied that these groups sing very beautifully. If one of the men can play an instrument, he brings it with him, and on Sunday mornings the streets are full of music. The first time I heard it I thought there was a wedding somewhere, because it sounded like the way they play at weddings in Silesia. It was only later that I discovered what this music means. It is the sound of religious songs being played to attract people who are out on the streets and give them the word of life as they pass by.

How do people react to these open-air services? Just as they did when the Apostle Paul first preached the Gospel in Athens – some mock and jeer, some go quietly by and others say they have heard enough for the moment; but there are also some who receive the word with a believing heart.

Several times while I was in London I had the opportunity to relate how I preach the Gospel in both Polish and German, and to say that when I preach in Polish it is usually to a congregation of 5,000–6,000 hearers. This remark always excited lively interest, as there are not many churches in London which can accommodate such a large crowd. On top of this, there are so many churches and other places where services are held that it is hard to expect that all of them should gather congregations in their thousands. On Sunday 15 May I attended services at two churches: at eleven in the morning at a German church, where I found at most fifty people, and at seven in the evening at Spurgeon's Tabernacle, where a sermon preached by Rev. Pierson was heard by a congregation of at least 7,000. In general I saw that the English are very diligent in church attendance. Services are held not just on Sundays, but also during the week, particularly on Friday and Wednesday evenings. Attendance at weekday services is not as numerous as on Sundays, but nowhere did I find a church empty during a service.

What are church services in England like? There are great differences on this between particular denominations: the Anglicans have their order of service, the Methodists theirs, the Baptists theirs and so on. In the Anglican Church the ministers wear long surplices with sleeves, exactly like those worn in Silesia by Catholic priests. The Methodists also use surplices. Other denominations do not follow this practice; their ministers lead services in black gowns, and among the Baptists, Congregationalists and other groups pastors do not use special garments at all, they wear ordinary black suits just like other people. At first this looks strange, as if you were not at a service. However, this custom will quickly be accepted by all who have the opportunity to hear, as I did, the words of Rev. Pierson – words which sprang from the depths of a heart devoted to God. The opponents of gowns and surplices say that it is not attire which makes a preacher, but a heart made new by the Holy Ghost. To a certain extent they are right, although those who retain the wearing of special attire when leading
services surely do no wrong, as in this they conform to the ancient practice of the Christian
Church.

I have already mentioned the fact that the English stand to sing their hymns. I did not find a
single hymn anywhere in an English hymnbook which was similar to one of ours or to
German hymns. Neither did I hear a single hymn tune which was similar to any of ours. It is
the singing of hymns that best reflects the difference in the way the Germans and the English
understand their religion. German hymns are sung slowly, seriously and with due ceremony;
the English sing quickly, briskly and cheerfully. Before we in Silesia have sung one verse, an
English congregation will have finished a whole hymn, because their hymns themselves are
also much shorter.

Translated from the Polish by Peter Nicholson.