

STAND FIRM AND FAITHFUL

The first recorded martyr for the Unitarian faith was Katherine Weigel (or Vogel), of Cracow, Poland, who in 1529 was accused of apostasy because she believed in the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus. Bishop Gamrat of Cracow exhibited great zeal in hunting down heretics and pursued Katherine Weigel until she should make an orthodox confession. She defended herself with great ability, but since she could not be brought to confess what she could not believe, she was convicted of blasphemy and burned at the stake on April 19, 1539 in the market place of Cracow. She was then a white-haired lady of 80 years, and according to contemporary accounts, went to her death boldly and cheerfully. As Socrates two thousand years before, she was convinced that nothing evil would befall her in this life or beyond, if she would stand firm and faithful to the highest truth as she could understand it. And the faith for which she died, through her sacrifice, led others to strengthen and live their liberal faith. One was burned at the stake, but the Unitarian movement in Poland grew.

The century that followed the death of Katherine Weigel was dotted by other Unitarians who died for their faith. The more famous Michael Servetus was similarly martyred for his Unitarian beliefs in 1553. The last to go to the stake for Unitarian beliefs were Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman, who were converted to Unitarianism by Polish emigres in Holland, and burned at the stake in Smithfield, England, in 1612. It would be left to the twentieth century to see more Unitarians martyred as they also stood firm and faithful as fearful orthodoxy snuffed out their lives. Persecution, however, in 16th century Poland as elsewhere, never snuffed out Unitarian ideas, for, as the German folk song puts it, thoughts are free; no hunter can trap them, nor prison bars hold them. Martyrs die, but in part because of them Unitarian ideas and values live.

Ref.: Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, vol. 1, pp. 283-284.