

And if Chopin had not been Polish?

by Grenville Powney



Lazienki Palace in the Summer: Oil painting by M. Zaleski, 1838. Warsaw National Museum.

The mood of the painting corresponds to the composer's desire that his "Adagio from the new Concerto [...] more romance-like, calm, melancholic [might] create the impression of a kind glance at a place which has left a thousand dear memories in one's mind." (Chopin to T. Woyciechowski, Warsaw, May 15, 1830).

She played concerts in the Lazienki Royal Park in central Warsaw, the home of the Kings of Poland long ago. Now for those who thing, as I did before my first visit to Warsaw, that the capital of Poland is nothing but drab high-rise apartment blocks, like East Berlin was, and icicles year-round, I can report that nothing could be further from the truth. Reconstructed central Warsaw (the nazis destroyed much of it) is beautiful - lovely buildings, tree-lined avenues and glorious parks, set off to perfection in summer by brilliant sunshine and 28 to 39 degrees C.

But the center piece is Lazienki Park. Better timbered than any New York park (and replanted because the nazis pinched the trees) and cleaner than any in New York (Polish people have a thing about cleanliness and tidiness), that park is by far the most attractive I have seen anywhere. It knocks spots off any in America. Of course the old Royal Palace buildings in the Park are well maintained and used as part museums, part concert venues.

The jewel in the center is a small lake, properly constructed but in size a mere pond, with a twenty-four foot high monument to Fryderyk Chopin on its edge (the nazis blew it up but the patient Poles rebuilt it), around which are four thousand red rose bushes of identical variety selected to give summer visitors a magnificent show. Then around the outside of the roses are the park trees - planted to woodland density, not skimpingly. When I first saw the place - and had recovered my breath - I reflected that the Poles could teach the Romans a thing or two about amphitheater design. Here were no great blocks of stone (except the plinth for the monument which the nazis tried but failed to destroy.) This amphitheater was vegetable, not

Ask any ten people on a Greyhound bus - a workable definition of "the man in the street" - to name one classical music composer and odds are that "Chopin" will win.

Curious. Although Chopin is my favorite, I recognize that some other composers knew a thing or two. And Chopin was not the only Romantic composer. So why those answers on the bus?

I spent much of this year in Poland escorting one of Poland's top concert pianists, Monica Rosca, on her tours so I had time on my hands. Alas there were no Greyhound buses in Poland, so I couldn't ask Polish Greyhound travelers why their counterparts in America gave those answers. And Monika didn't help much. "He's Polish" she replied simply, as though that explained it all. "IS Polish?" I queried, "I thought he died in 1849." "Not here," she replied, "here he is a living legend. And in parts of Asia - Japan and Korea for example - any thirty people over seven years of age in any bus would give you thirty answers, and all would be "Chopin." Now thoroughly confused, I shut up and carried on driving.

She played concerts in the Lazienki Royal Park

mineral. Then I noticed something else which later, I came to realize, is common in Poland. The trees were in perfect condition, thanks to loving care of tree doctors. To that setting we can now add glorious sunshine, a clear blue sky and an audience of at least one thousand people sitting amidst those roses and trees. And the finishing touches - a size C concert grand piano at the foot of the monument with a fabric sun canopy overhead, and loudspeakers scattered unobtrusively amongst the roses and trees. What a setting for a concert! No summer bandstand in an American park can compete.

But why, I asked Monica, are there so many willow trees? "Ah, willows," she mused, "they are from the beautiful Mazovian plain in which Chopin's birthplace Zelazowa Wola is located. You will see them everywhere when we go to Zelazowa Wola next week. How could we possibly create this setting without Mazovian willow trees?" How indeed. How stupid of me.

As Monica was doing her stuff, I circulated and between pieces in her program I asked some visitors why? Why here? Many had obviously come a long way and at sizable cost. Whether from Scottsdale, Arizona; Yokohama, Japan; Seoul, Korea; Coventry, England, or wherever, the substance of their answers was much the same. A Chopin concert in Lazienki Park in Warsaw is not just any old concert. It is a breath-takingly enchanting experience. Indeed it was, and searching the faces of the audience I could see many wet eyes - a product of the unique combination of setting, music and pianist. Any one on its own would have impressed, but all three in combination could reduce the toughest nuts to tears. But there was more. When she had played her third and last encore, and signaled she had finished by accepting a double-armful of flowers, the one thousand delighted people didn't end their standing ovation. No, no. They just carried on whilst Monica repeatedly curtsied. Then she blew them a kiss and for the first time in my life I witnessed a large audience blowing kisses at a performer. Of course, by now, tears were streaming down my cheeks, as they were down the cheeks of an elderly lady from Ontario, Canada, on my right, and of a young man from Asia on my left. But the most poignant was a tough-looking middle-aged man with a North American accent in front of me, to whom I had spoken. He could have been a lumberjack from Oregon, a Stockyard worker from Chicago, or an oil driller from Alaska. He was crying like a baby and through his tears he sobbed, "now I've seen it all. I'll die a happy man." I knew what he meant. I felt exactly the same.

Poland has created magnificent venues for its visitors and Chopin is the central figure. Then the settings, the music, the pianists, and the audience provide the emotions. Not surprisingly, vast number of visitors every year go home and tell everyone they know about it.

The second part of the magic surrounding the name Chopin, is about resistance. Now those who like me saw the film "Casablanca" several times will know that the musical symbol of French resistance to the nazis was the Marseillaise. And what a good one it was. So what about Poland?

Well, during its one thousand years of chronicled history Poland was torn by wars and invasions, its land fought over, its buildings destroyed and its people abused. Fortitude runs deep in the Polish character. So does the spirit of resistance to tyranny.



So let's start at the end of the eighteenth century when the country then known as Poland was carved up by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. In 1795 the independent state of Poland ceased to exist and was not restored until the end of the First World War. Pausing there, one may ask how could a stateless people hold on to their identity for up to five generations and have something left when statehood was restored?

For Poland the answer was "customs, culture, and language," which faithfully were handed down from one generation to the next during

those 120 years. That is the first reason why Polish people are proud of their heritage - their forbears had to work hard to preserve the past for the benefit of future generations. It may also explain why Polish people are not given to arrogance. Then along came Fryderyk Chopin whilst his country was partitioned. Born in 1810 in Zelazowa Wola, an hour's drive from Warsaw in a modern car, he became renowned not only in his lifetime, but also during his childhood. Then, during his teenage years, he composed Mazurkas, Sonatas, Rondos, and a Polonaise, which are still played today.

Though his countrymen could not then have known it, the birth of Chopin would come to add a very large new dimension to the term "Polish Culture." Much of Chopin's life's work as a composer was influenced by the folk music of the territory he loved - lovely Mazovian plain in which he was born. In that sense Chopin was preserving a part of Polish heritage which already existed, in addition to creating so much more with his unique compositions. His music was a natural focus point for those resisting Partition.

Curiously, the man who should have most feared Chopin's work - the Tzar of Russia, the architect of Poland's partition - did not ban his music even though Robert Schumann, a contemporary and admirer of Chopin's work, in a published article described Chopin's Mazurkas as "Cannon hidden under the flowers." In fact the Tzar bestowed gifts on the youthful Chopin.

But more than a century later the nazis did ban Chopin's works. Hell-bent on expanding the meanings of rape and pillage and not content with killing nearly seven million Polish people, destroying much of Warsaw, decimating Polish forests and woodlands, plundering works of art and raping and torturing on a wholesale scale, the nazis targeted Polish culture. Anyone cough listening to or playing Chopin was shot and Chopin statues were destroyed - all to the greater glory of the Third Reich.

The urn containing Fryderyk Chopin's heart was offered to the nation by his family on March 1, 1878, the anniversary of the composer's death. The event was commemorated by a memorial plaque sealed on the pillar of the left nave in Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, where the urn is kept.

So the Polish people responded in their traditional way - by continuing to resist - and they played Chopin in secret during the Nazi occupation inspiring the fighters' resistance. Chopin's Polonaise was the Polish equivalent to the Marseillaise, and it could never have been played with such emotion - and to such good effect - as it was in cellars and apartments during Nazi occupation. What a cannon!

Chopin was one of the major symbols of Polish resistance for he had already become deeply entrenched as an important part of Polish culture, his memory and work to be preserved for future generations when Europe could purge itself of the stench of Nazism. There is something very, very special about any piece of music, and the name of the man who composed it, which come to be the focus of resistance to tyranny - and tyranny with a vastly greater death toll in Poland than in any other part of Western Europe.

Then there is the impact, on large numbers of families around the world, of the greatest music competition ever conceived. In 1925 Polish professor, Jerzy Zurawlew, came up with the idea of organizing international piano competitions dedicated to the works of Chopin, and the first was held in 1927 - only a few years after Poland regained its status as an independent state. Since then the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competitions, held in Warsaw every five years, have attracted the enthusiasm and dedicated efforts of young pianists in many countries, and the winners have been jet-propelled into stardom in the concert halls all over the world. In the 13 Competitions, held between 1927 and 1995 a total of 1155 talented pianists from 36 countries competed. The standard being so high, any one of those could do a workmanlike job at any provincial concert hall anywhere. And behind those statistics there were tens of thousands of youngsters world-wide striving to reach Chopin Competition standard, and behind all those are tens of millions of Chopin-lovers of whom a great many watch closely for the results.

Then there is the fact that because of Chopin Warsaw unarguably has become the classical music center of Europe and probably the world. At least three Chopin concerts are played in Warsaw every day and, on most days, there are concerts with or without orchestra playing the works of other great composers.

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was a genius and composer of exquisite music who has fired the imagination and stirred the deepest and most worthy emotions of untold millions. But attached to his name is that extra special aura which flows from the tormented history of Poland. Add to that the tremendous pride of Poland in its most famous son, and the dedication and attention to detail of the Polish government and music organizations in staging such superb occasions as in Łazienki Park, and we come near to an answer. But not quite.



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No visitors to Warsaw should miss a look at Ostrogski Palace, which houses the Chopin museum and his own piano, two minutes from the center of Warsaw. Destroyed by the nazis, then carefully rebuilt, brick by brick and stone by stone, it is a magnificent and charming building and now the headquarters of the Warsaw Fryderyk Chopin Society, and the center of world-wide Chopin Society movement. Entering its doors one can smell

calm efficiency and total dedication of their task. It is in those hallowed premises that most Chopin concerts are organized, including the world-famous concerts in the charming house in Zelazowa Wola where Chopin was born. But - and this is so typically Polish - in a magnificent concert salon on the top floor the

most talented pianists frequently play Chopin concerts for Polish school-children. In Monika's case, she followed with an impromptu quiz to increase their knowledge of the works and life of Chopin. They loved it, and those two hundred youngsters, and tens of thousands of others throughout Poland like them, will continue the good work. Poland needed Fryderyk Chopin. And Poland's tormented history bestowed on his name that extra aura. Nowadays the naturally reserved Polish people express their pride by exporting the beauty of Chopin's life's work and his symbolism in times of national adversity, quietly and efficiently, and flowing from their deep love of music and exhibited in the most delightful ways. If Chopin had been an American or British can one imagine the center of a New York or London park being re-landscaped, then used as is Lazienki Park in Warsaw? The answer has to be no. Of course his music would nonetheless be loved. But the answers of the Greyhound travelers would be different.

Oh yes - and the monument by the lake in Lazienki Park? It is of an inspired Chopin sitting under a broken willow, thus capturing the essence of Poland in past adversity. But what of the future?

Monika's travels took us to a quaint village on the Dordogne in France where some good friends, after dinner and discussions about Chopin, the Tzar of Russia and the implications of future Polish entry into the European Union, raised their glasses. Our hostess Dominique's delightful toast reflected the magic of the name of Chopin, his Polish roots and the future of a Europe including Poland. In a few words she said it all - "Vive l'occupation Polonaise!"

Glancing at my glass I was sure I could see the face of the Tzar of Russia - a glass to his lips for the toast, winking and with a very wry smile!

*Author **Grenville Powney** is British. A graduate engineer, former British Army officer, worked as an engineer in Britain and the US, before he started his writing career. A passionate lover of Chopin and his music all his life, wrote many articles, about Fryderyk Chopin, his music and Poland and a novel "Dooshka." He is a concert manager of Monica Rosca, Polish pianist.*