

# Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

*Cavalry Hero: Casimir Pulaski* (by Dorothy Adams)

In *So Young a Queen*, the first book of the “Polish Advocates of Hope and Nationhood” Portraits, the story ended on a high note—the selfless sacrifice and wisdom of Queen Jadwiga resulted in a strong, prosperous, and Catholic Poland. A nation that became a center of trade, culture, education, and also a haven of tolerance for religious minorities.

But as *Calvary Hero* opens, nearly four centuries have passed, and Poland is dying. Surrounded by several powerful, grasping kingdoms, Poland always struggled for its existence. But a series of horrific wars in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, known collectively as *The Deluge*, had reduced Poland’s population by 1/3 and robbed much of its treasure. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the weakened nation was already a protectorate of Russia: independent in theory but vulnerable to Russian political intrigue and torn by many factions. Its borders to the west and the south were being nibbled away by Prussia and Austria. Shortly after the events narrated in *Calvary Hero*, Poland disappeared from the map as an independent nation—swallowed up by Russia, Austria, and Germany (Prussia). Its resurrection wouldn’t occur until 1918. (You can read about that in the next book in this series, *The Lion of Poland: The Story of Paderewski*.)

Joseph Pulaski and his sons were fighting in a hopeless cause. Their goal—Poland’s freedom from Russian control—was something most Poles wanted. But too few were willing to risk everything—their property, possessions, treasure, and lives. Idealists such as the Pulaskis, with their wholehearted devotion to justice and freedom, nourished by their Catholic faith, were a vanishing species. As a result of his convictions, Casimir Pulaski lost his home and most of his family. He found himself a defeated and penniless exile with the tide of popular opinion turned against him.

Perhaps his greatest pain was to be unable to use his God-given talent as a warrior in a righteous cause. It is no wonder, then, that Casimir Pulaski chose to go to America and fight for freedom rather than to return to his beloved homeland under a pardon that stipulated a life of retirement. In the American Revolution he found a cause similar, but more hopeful than the doomed struggle to save Poland.

It is true that he experienced here some of the same problems he had in Poland: lack of appreciation from political leaders and the failure of military superiors to make optimal use of his cavalry. (It seems that God wanted Pulaski to learn the virtue of patience—a long-term project!) Despite this, America offered Pulaski more scope for his abilities than did Poland. His talent at small, “guerilla”-style actions which had been stifled in Poland came fully into play here. His talent for horsemanship and knowledge of cavalry tactics added a new weapon to the continental arsenal. Although his abilities were not thoroughly appreciated during his lifetime

(except perhaps by George Washington), the cavalry training manual he wrote was used for years to come and earned him the title “Father of the US Cavalry.” And probably nothing else redounds to Pulaski’s glory as much as his very first adventure at the Battle of Brandywine, and might be the reason that Providence had sent him here: he saved the life of George Washington. For all we know, that rescue saved the entire American Revolution.

Pulaski did not live to see America win independence. The battle in which he died was a defeat for the American cause. But to die a hero’s death on the battlefield would have been, despite the pain, a great joy for him. America’s gratitude to Casimir Pulaski is evident in the many towns, bridges, parks, and naval warships that bear his name.