

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

The Lion of Poland: The Story of Paderewski (by Ruth and Paul Hume)

Poland ceased to exist as an independent nation in 1795, having been absorbed by aggressive neighbors Russia, Germany, and Austria. The next 100+ years saw a series of doomed uprisings by groups of patriotic Poles, each followed up by the conqueror's attempts to obliterate Polish identity. While Poles who took up arms did not succeed, neither did conquerors who tried to extinguish Polish language and culture. On the "culture war" front, Poles were clearly the victors. They even had an underground national anthem ready for the day when it could become official. Its first line sums up their indomitable spirit: "Poland has not yet died, as long as we still live."

Ignace Paderewski didn't grow up consciously preparing himself to negotiate Poland's national rebirth and become its prime minister. But strangely enough, everything he did contributed to exactly that:

- Just growing up in Poland of the 1860s required Paderewski to be good at languages: schools and civic institutions were all conducted in Russian or German. This facility made it easier for him to eventually learn French (the language of diplomacy in those days) and later, English, where fluency would be vital to his efforts to explain Poland's plight to the American public.
- His musical studies and career earned him the celebrity that made him the late 19th century equivalent of Elvis Presley: people flocked to his concerts, female fans swooned. Then as now, the American public was fascinated by everything celebrities do and say. Thus, when Paderewski began speaking about Poland's needs as he toured the country, he had a ready-made, sympathetic audience. No mere political activist from Poland, however earnest, could have gotten such a hearing, much less the response that Paderewski did. And he used his "rock star" status to open doors to the halls of power—right up to the White House itself.
- With fame also came wealth, enough to enable him to maintain residences outside of Poland where he could entertain influential guests, and advocate for Poland's freedom, without fear of reprisal from Russia, Germany or Austria.
- With wealth also came the ability to fulfill his childhood dream of building the monument to the battle of Grünwald. His electrifying "Polish Phoenix" speech at its dedication formally launched his second career, at the age of 50, as a spokesman for the Polish people and eventually, a statesman.

All in all, one wonders whether the amazing career of Ignace Paderewski inspired a future champion of Polish freedom—Karol Wojtyła. The parallels are interesting: Karol Wojtyła was a gifted young actor who years later realizes that his magnetic personality and gift for oratory could inspire his people to a (non-violent) uprising, and that his celebrity status combined with

his moral authority (as Pope John Paul II) would open doors for him to work with leaders of the free world to eventually free not just Poland, but all of eastern Europe from the slavery of communism.

The unexpected turns in the lives of the Polish hero, Ignace Paderewski, and the Polish saint, John Paul II, remind us that, with faith and openness to the opportunities God sends our way, the gifts and talents he has given us might be put to use in ways far beyond anything we could imagine.