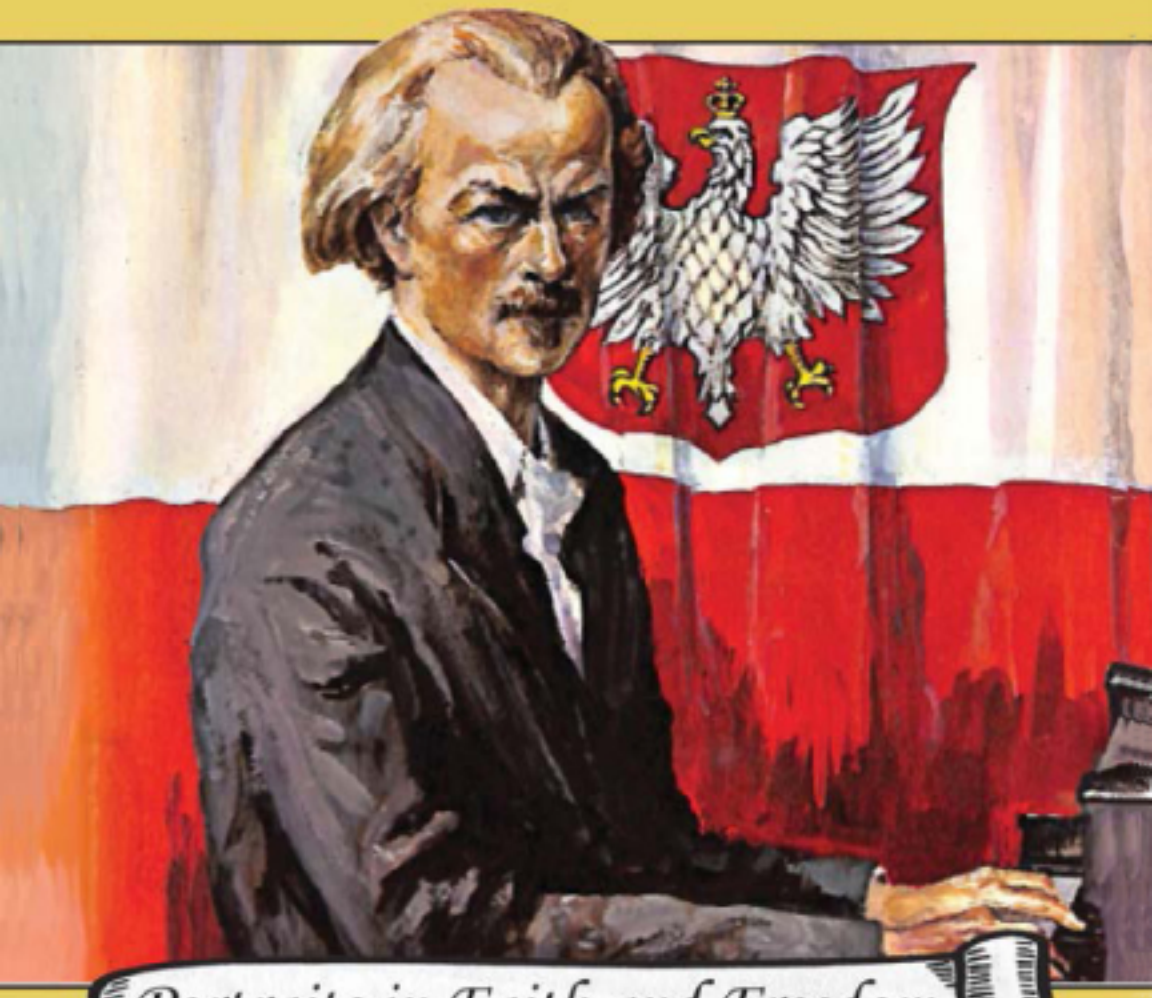
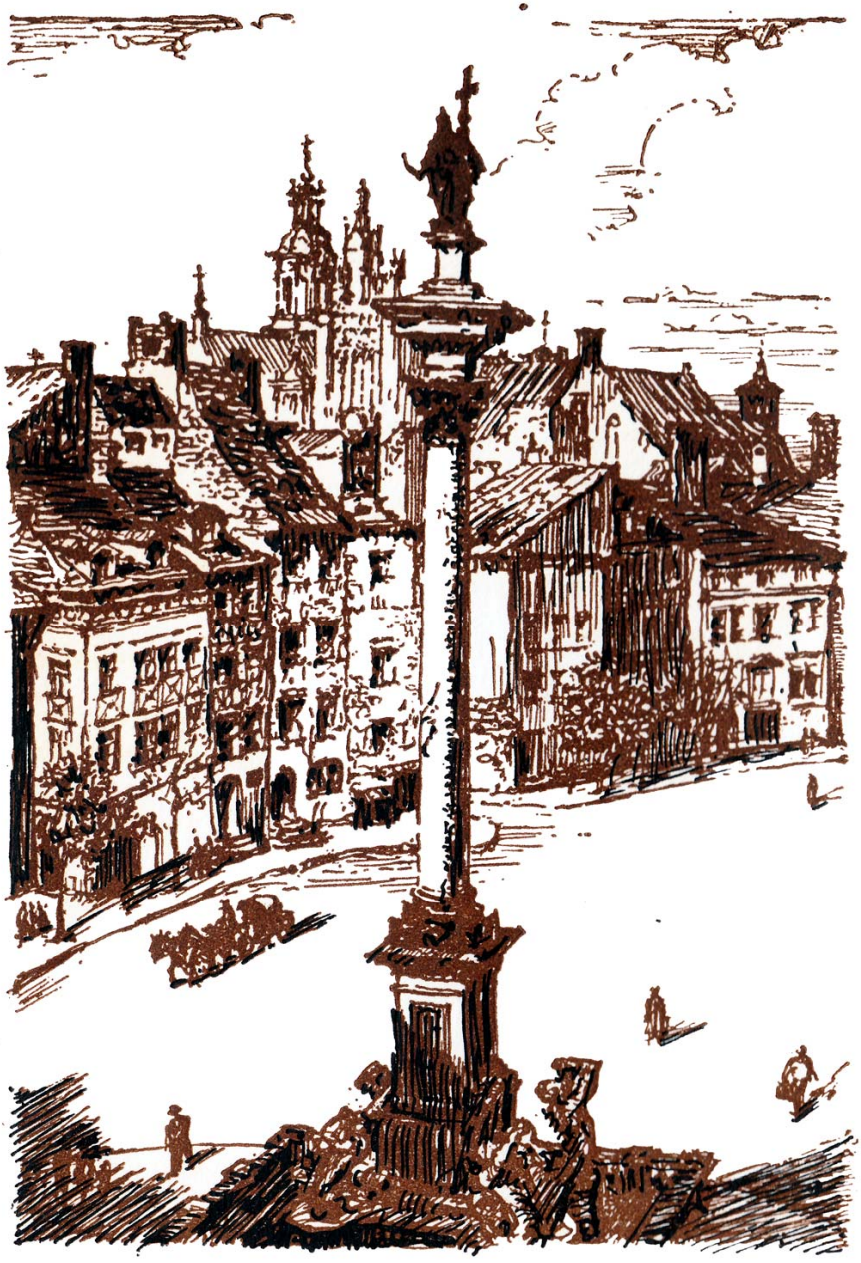
The Lion of Poland

The Story of Paderewski



Portraits in Faith and Freedom

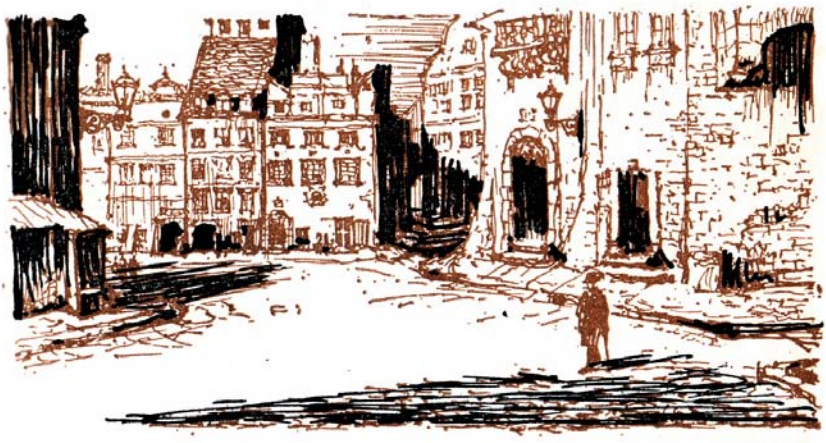
Ruth and Paul Hume



The Lion of Poland

The Story of Paderewski

by Ruth and Paul Hume



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Portraits in Faith and Freedom

SET 2: POLISH ADVOCATES OF HOPE AND NATIONHOOD

So Young a Queen: Jadwiga of Poland
Cavalry Hero: Casimir Pulaski
The Lion of Poland: The Story of Paderewski

Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950's and 60's by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

Web Resources

To access printable maps, a timeline, and pertinent internet links, visit https://www.bethlehembooks.com/lion-poland-story-paderewski-821

This is for Michael

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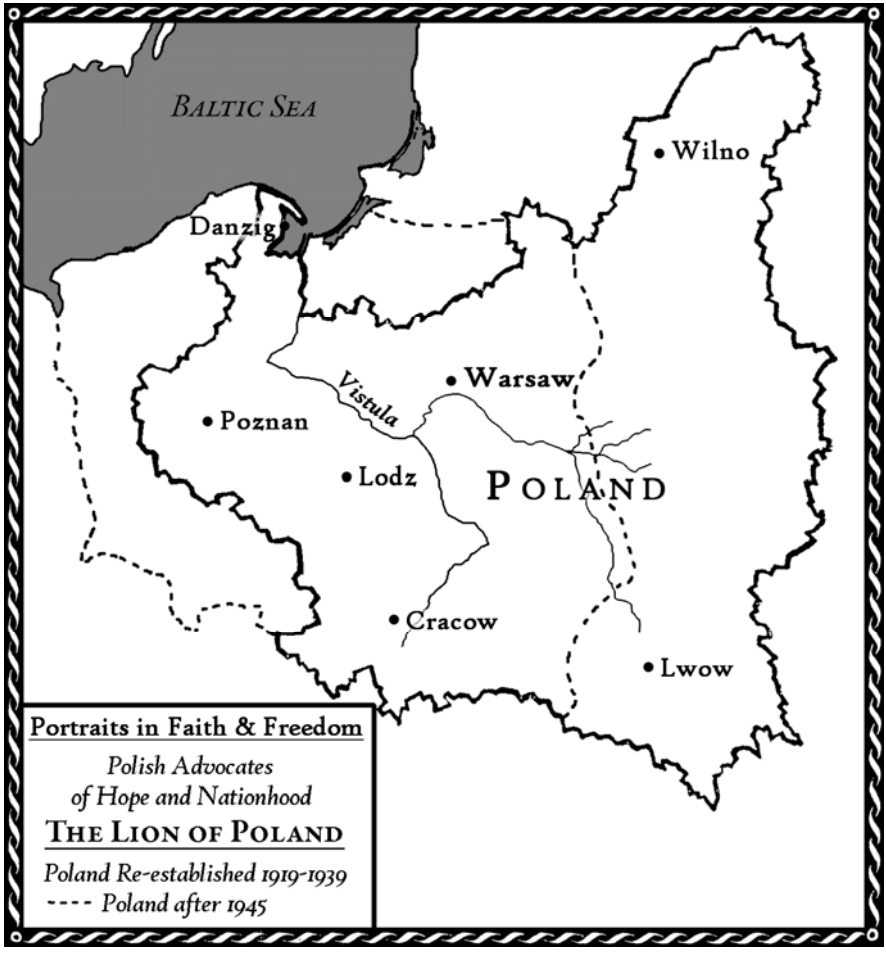
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THE LION OF POLAND
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A Note About Pronunciation

Although Paderewski quickly grew accustomed to hearing himself called “Paderooski” all across America, this is not his name! A Polish “w” is pronounced like an English “v”, so he is really “Pa-de-*rev*-skee.” Since Polish surnames change their final “i” to “a” when applied to women, his wife is called Madame “Pa-de-*rev*-ska.”

1. A Pounding at the Door

THE BOY LAY awake in the darkness, listening.

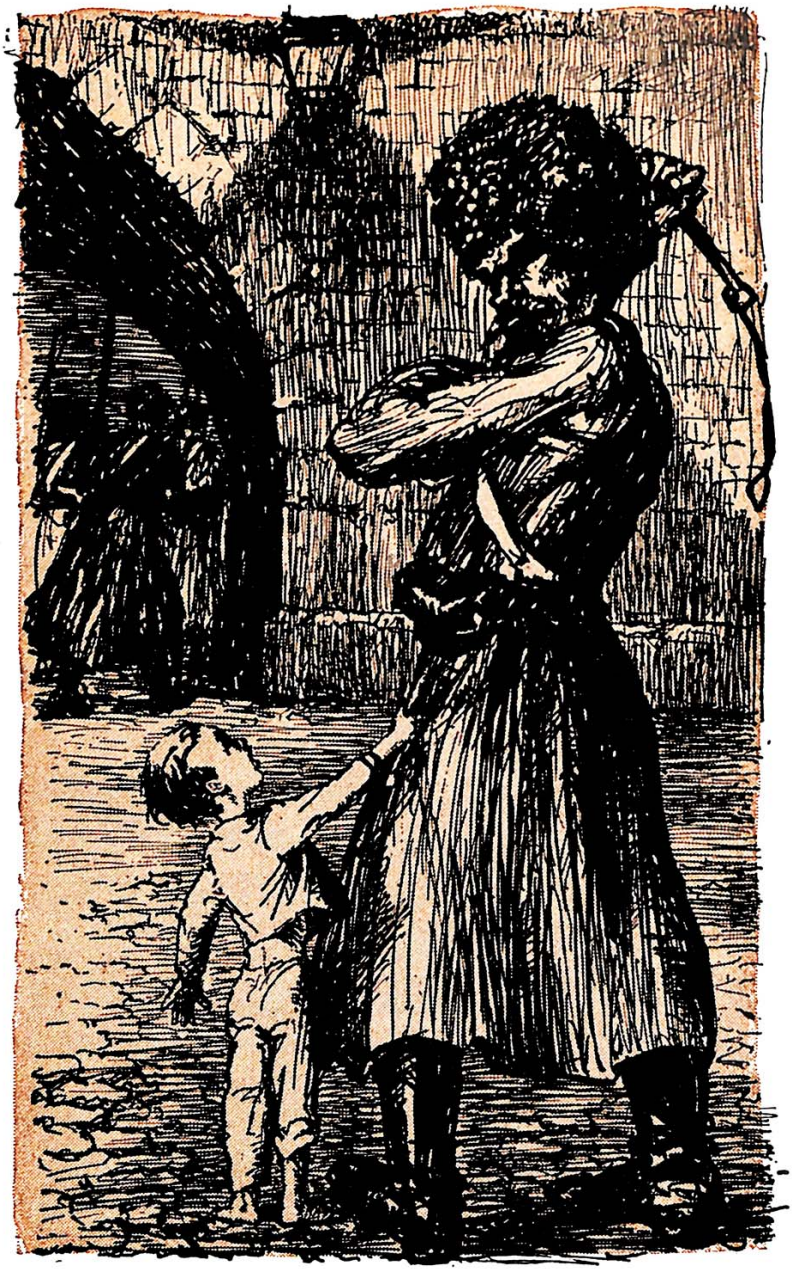
All evening long the adults in the house had been conversing in agitated whispers, behind closed doors. Now they were asleep—or pretending to be asleep, as he was pretending. The house was unnaturally silent.

Suddenly the boy sat up in bed, clutching the blanket around his shoulders and listening with every ounce of concentration he could muster. His ears were unusually sensitive. Surely he had heard a muted laugh in the blackness outside. Yes—and there was another, and then the sound of low-pitched voices, no longer concealed, and finally footsteps running to the house.

He leaped out of bed and flung open the window. The house was surrounded by Cossacks. Their leader was pounding on the door. “Jan Paderewski!” he was shouting. “Open it up before we break it down!”

The boy could hear the heavy bolt being drawn. By the time he had crept fearfully downstairs it was all over. His father was gone. His sister and his aunt were sobbing in each other’s arms. He ran into the courtyard. “Where is my father? What have you done with him?” he asked one of the soldiers. When the man ignored him, he tugged at his coat and cried, “Where are you taking my father?”

A stinging pain shot along his cheek as the Russian whirled and struck at him with a knout. “Let go of my coat, you Polish brat!” the man half snarled and half laughed. He called out some orders to his men, and the troop clattered down the road and out of the boy’s sight.



The boy raised his hand to his smarting cheek. The Cossack rope had ripped across it like a firebrand, and the fire had burned itself into his soul.

Young Ignace Paderewski was only four years old on the night the Russian soldiers took his father to prison for a year. Jan Paderewski had been accused of plotting the overthrow of his Imperial Majesty, Alexander II, Emperor of all the Russias.

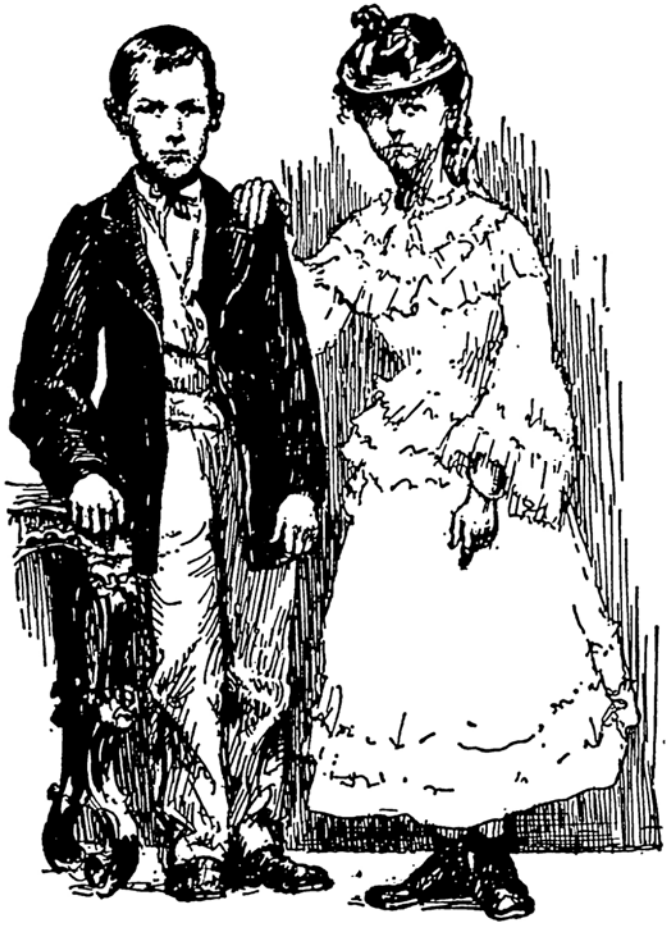
What Jan Paderewski had actually done was to allow firearms to be stored in his basement until such time as they might be useful. But besides getting him arrested and imprisoned, they had actually accomplished very little. The revolution of 1863 and 1864 was just one more in a succession of uprisings by which the Polish people struck back at their oppressors. None of these unhappy revolts had ever won back the country's lost freedom, but they kept alive the fierce pride of the Polish people, a pride that the rulers of three nations had tried for nearly a hundred years to extinguish.

Poland, as a nation, no longer existed. The ancient Catholic kingdom had been swallowed up by three hungry neighbors: Germany, Austria, and Russia. It had not, therefore, been swallowed whole, but in pieces. Three times—in 1772, in 1793, in 1795—the three royal butchers had met over a map of Poland and thought up new ways of dividing the country to their mutual satisfaction. To their distaste they found the Polish people did not agree with their selfish plans.

Ignace Jan Paderewski was born in the Russian third of Poland, on November 6, 1860. His mother died when he was a baby, so his father's imprisonment was a doubly cruel blow. The boy and his older sister, Antonina, were very close. Like all Polish children, they had been brought up on heroic tales of their country's former glory, and their childhood games always centered around the melancholy struggle for freedom. The boy, dressed in a Polish uniform of red and white paper, would charge madly about the house on a hobby horse, smiting his country's enemies with a wooden sword. By the time he was six or seven these games had taken on a reality for him that no one suspected. Young as he was, he determined that when he grew up he would fight for his country, not with a wooden sword but with whatever weapons God would give him. Gradually he took it into his head that only by becoming someone special could he ever hope to help his people and his country to freedom.

Soon after Jan Paderewski's release from prison, he moved his family to the little town of Sudylkow, where the boy grew up. By the time he was three, Ignace's family had realized that he had an unusual talent for music. His father, determined to give every pos-

sible advantage to his children, brought a music teacher to the house to give them piano lessons. The teacher was a violinist at heart, and he could not do much for the children except teach them the names of the notes and set them to playing dreadful duets, arranged from popular operatic arias.



As a student Ignace was rather lazy, but he had a natural gift for languages and a great love for reading the history of his country. When he was ten years old, his sympathetic tutor gave him a book that described the great battle of Grünwald in which the Poles had defeated the greedy German Knights of the Cross and driven them from Poland. As the boy read the stirring account over and over, he

was struck by an inspiration. The battle had been fought in 1410. This meant that its five hundredth anniversary was only forty years away—in 1910. "When I grow up," young Ignace promised himself, "I'm going to be rich and famous enough to build a great monument in honor of the anniversary of the battle of Grünwald!"

It was one of those odd fancies that overtake sensitive children. He kept it to himself to avoid unnecessary laughter at his expense.

It seemed obvious to Ignace's father that his son was clearly headed for a career in music. The boy played the piano constantly, although he much preferred to improvise his own melodies rather than practice anyone else's. The music notebook that his proud father had given him was already half filled with random compositions. But how, Jan Paderewski wondered, could the poor boy possibly get the musical training he needed in Sudylkow? When word came to town that a railroad was soon to be built, connecting Sudylkow with Warsaw, the father took it as a sign from heaven. In Warsaw there was a famous conservatory of music. Jan Paderewski swore that his boy would have a chance to study there, no matter how much penny-pinching would have to be done at home in order to finance the venture. In 1872, when Ignace was twelve years old, he and his father set out on the very first train that ran to Warsaw.

It was an exciting and a somewhat frightening adventure. The Warsaw Conservatory did not have dormitories and supervised living for its students, as a modern school would have. The twelve-year-old country boy would be more or less on his own in the big city. Added to this worry was Mr. Paderewski's concern over the fact that his son had had so little formal training in music. Would the entrance exams at the Conservatory be too much for him? As they were ushered into the office of Director Kontski, the father was more unnerved than the boy.

The director looked at Ignace's musical composition book and then he looked squarely at Ignace. The boy returned his gaze without a blink. Kontski turned to the anxious father and said cordially, "We'll take this boy immediately—and without any examinations."

The first hurdle had been taken easily.

Their unexpected luck at the Conservatory had improved Mr. Paderewski's spirits. "Now," he said to Ignace, "all our worries are over! First we buy you a piano! Then we find you a place to live!"

A few hours later his optimism was again on the decline. Although father and son had inspected nearly every piano in Warsaw, they had seen nothing that was not far too expensive. The last address on their list was that of the Kerntopf factory, the most famous piano manufacturers in Poland.

A wasted effort, this one, the elder Paderewski thought gloomily, as he trudged up the stairs to the showroom. If he had not been able to meet the price of lesser piano makers, how could he afford a Kerntopf piano?

Mr. Kerntopf himself greeted the two weary customers. Yes, he told the father, several used pianos were available, but they were rather expensive. At the price Mr. Paderewski had mentioned? Well, there was only the old upright over in the corner. The boy was welcome to try it out if he cared to.

Ignace rushed over to the piano and began to play. It wasn't much of a piano, perhaps, but as long as he had something—anything—to practice on, he would be happy.

While he was playing, a younger man came into the showroom and stood listening attentively. After a while he turned to Mr. Paderewski and said, "What plans have you in mind for your son?"

The father said proudly, "My boy has just been accepted for the Conservatory without an examination. That's why I want to buy him a piano!"

"Not this old thing!" the young man said. "It would be worthless in a year. You don't have to buy him a piano! I will give him one to practice on. For nothing!"

Mr. Paderewski could hardly believe his ears. He looked inquiringly at Mr. Kerntopf. "This is my partner and my eldest son," the old gentleman said, shrugging as if to say that there was nothing he could do about this sort of impulse. But he looked pleased in spite of himself.

Mr. Paderewski said, "Now I must find a place for Ignace to live. I would like to get him a room with a family. He is so young to be alone in the city. Perhaps you could advise me?"

Edward Kerntopf laughed. "Here is a family. It's a little big already. There are ten children in it, so one more will hardly be noticed! Leave your boy here and he can practice on all the pianos in the factory."

Mr. Paderewski beamed. All his problems had been solved at once.

God works in different ways to help the people who are close to Him accomplish His work and theirs. In Paderewski's life it happened time and again that when exactly the right person was needed to fill a specific need, that person was always sent to him. Edward Kerntopf was the first of many.

Although young Ignace wept bitterly when it was time to say goodbye to his father, his tears dried quickly. A houseful of youngsters to play with and a factory full of pianos to play on! It was a splendid combination.

On the day Ignace reported to the Conservatory for his first piano lesson, his excitement was so great that he could hardly walk without reeling. Never in his short life had he looked forward to anything so eagerly. To study piano with a really fine teacher! Young as he was, the boy knew very well that although he could improvise cleverly and could impress his neighbors in Sudylkow, he did not really know how to play the piano correctly. He had a vast natural instinct for music, but such matters as correct hand position, fingering, and proper pedalling were mysteries to him. This was not surprising, since neither of his teachers at home had known much more than he himself knew about piano technique. But now, he thought naively, now at last he would learn everything! Here at the Conservatory some great teacher would give him the key to unlock all the secrets of the piano.

By the end of the first lesson, poor Ignace's enthusiasm had been cruelly dampened. The teacher to whom he had been assigned was a surly type. He listened to the boy play for a few minutes and then said flatly, "You'll never be a pianist. You haven't got the hands for it!" He added helpfully, "I understand you write music. You'd better stick to that!"

It was a blow, but Ignace realized that one man was not the whole faculty. Immediately after the lesson, he went to Director Kontski and asked for another teacher. Unfortunately, the second teacher was exactly the opposite of the first. The first man cared only for ready-made technique and had failed to recognize the boy's natural talent. The second man, with whom Ignace studied for two years, was so poetic and romantic in his approach to music that he paid no attention to the hardcore technical problems of piano playing. Although he had vast admiration for his young pupil, he could not give him what he most needed.

After several discouraging weeks at the Conservatory, Ignace was ready to agree that he was not really cut out to be a pianist. Perhaps he should start thinking seriously about some other instrument. Since he had always liked the sound of the flute, he decided to try it out. The flute teacher decided otherwise. “You’ll never be a flute player, boy! You haven’t got the lips for it!”

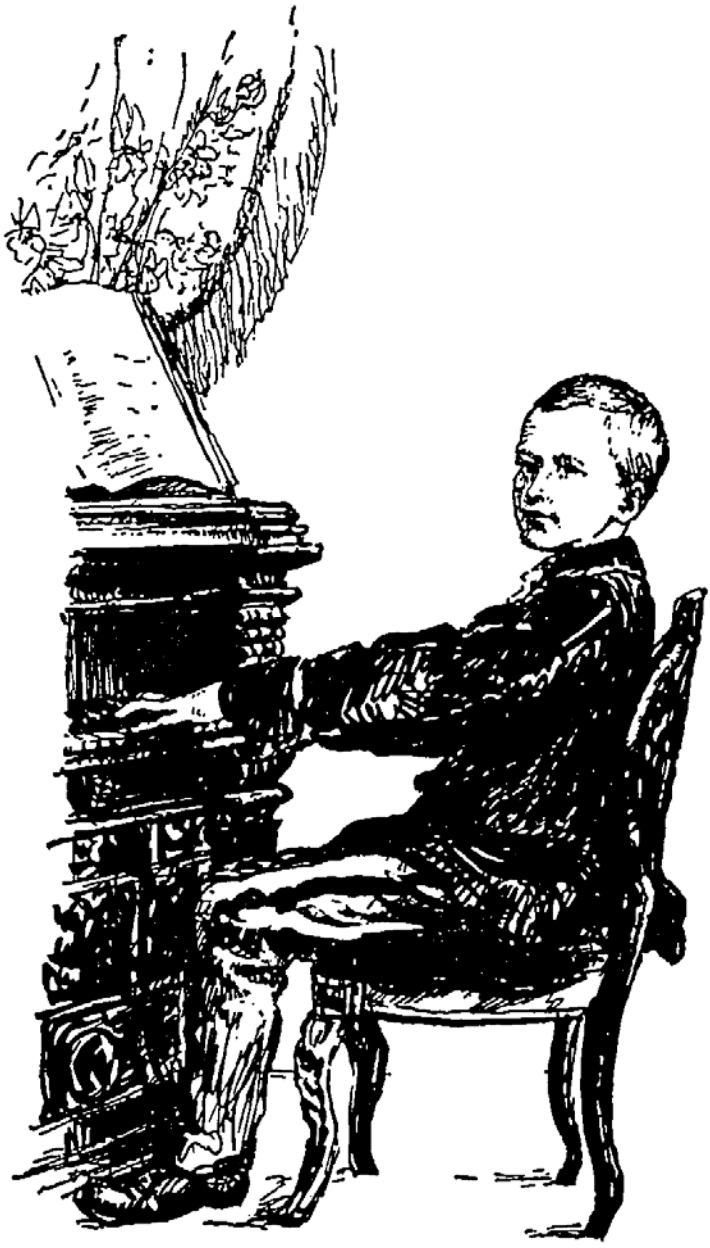
The teacher of oboe and clarinet was a much more agreeable man, but he finally had to admit that Ignace’s future did not lie with either instrument. So did the teacher of bassoon and French horn. In time, however, the young musician found his instrumental niche. “Now, my dear boy,” the professor of brass instruments told him one day, “you are always trying to play piano. But why? You have no future at all with the piano! Your future is here, playing the trombone!” He flung an arm enthusiastically around Ignace’s shoulder. “Don’t you know that you are a great natural trombone player?”

The teachers who were most enthusiastic about the new student, however, were the men who taught him theory and harmony and composition. “Never mind which instrument you play best,” they told him. “Learn to play all of them because it will be useful to you as a composer. And it is as a composer that you will become famous. As a pianist, never!”

But as he sat night after night in the dimly-lit warehouse, as he worked hour after hour trying to make his fingers produce the kind of sound he wanted to lure out of the piano, he knew that nothing had changed. He would be a pianist no matter who said what. He would be a pianist if it took him a dozen more years to find the right teacher!

Hard work and discouragement did not by any means prevent Ignace from thoroughly enjoying life in Warsaw. For the first time in his life he had a chance to hear real music, properly performed. Edward Kerntopf saw to that. He took the boy to a succession of concerts and operas, and even took him visiting in the homes of Warsaw’s leading musicians. Nothing could shake his faith in Ignace’s future as a pianist, even though the boy had so far shown progress in nothing but trombone playing.

During his first few days in Warsaw, Edward had taken him to see all the city’s beloved monuments to the past. Ignace returned to them again and again, dreaming as he had dreamed from his childhood of the day when his country would be reborn. He liked to walk by the great yellow Zamek, once the royal palace of the kings



of Poland. In the palace square stood the noble bronze figure of King Sigismond III, who held a cross in one hand and a sword in the other. Like every other Polish boy, Ignace knew the prophecy that had grown up around the statue: “When Sigismond shakes his