

**Speech given at
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
November 6, 2009**

Sponsored by the *Polish Student Association*

**PADEREWSKI
By
John Robilette**

During a concert tour in Poland in 2007, I asked a young waiter in a hotel in Warsaw the question: “Do you know who Ignace Jan Paderewski was?” He said, “Yes, I think he owned a restaurant in Warsaw.” I could have asked him another question: “Who made Poland free?” Most probably he would have answered Lech Walesa or Pope John Paul II. He would have only been half right. We tend to believe what we know, and what we know gets us through life, but it is not always true. For the Poland that John Paul II grew up in, from his birth in 1920 until Hitler invaded Poland on September 1 1939; the Poland that formed his first thoughts, his adolescence and young manhood, was a free Poland created by Paderewski. The values that animated the Polish resistance in World War II, freedom and the dignity of the human person, had already been lived out in the previous 20 years of a free Poland created by Paderewski.

In our present age, it is difficult to understand the immense popularity and admiration of Paderewski as a great classical concert pianist in the beginning of the 20th century. He was such an icon and celebrity that the mere mention of his name brought a nodding recognition throughout the globe. Great music was not marginalized in the culture then as it is now, it was considered for what it is – great music. Those that were educated were not done so beyond their capacity to learn. Great ideas were discussed, and philosophy was taught along with elocution and rhetoric. Politicians were literate in a world that was seeking hegemony, with Bismark uniting Germany, and Garibaldi in Italy, and the great Lincoln creating one nation through the crucible of the American Civil War. But Poland could only dream of these tumultuous changes because subjugation leaves only dreams when action cannot be attended to. For hundreds of years Poland had been under its neighbor’s boots, from the Teutonic knights of the 15th century to the Austrians, Prussians and Russians of the 18th and 19th centuries. Born in 1860, Paderewski was raised with Polish lore, his father telling him of glorious Polish resistance to oppression, of the heroism of Polish fighters down through the centuries and of their patriotism. He remembered these values when he approached the great titans at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919: Woodrow Wilson, Clemenceau, the “Tiger of France”, Lloyd George of Great Britain, and Vittorio Orlando of Italy. They are gathered there to carve up the world in the aftermath of the World War I. Striding across the world stage like four great colossi, they have allowed Paderewski to attend. And he has expended great energy to be there, stopping at nothing to convince Woodrow Wilson and his

administration for some time that someone needed to speak for Poland. Once at Versailles he lobbies them intensely with all the focus normally reserved for his blinding virtuosity and interpretive insights. He uses his charisma and persuasive powers, refined and honed on concert stages around the world, to convince them of the need for a free and autonomous Poland. And he succeeds...and is asked to be a signatory of the Versailles treaty. Years later, *Time* magazine said that "Paderewski put Poland on the map." He has already given up the piano and his career the previous year, in order to concentrate on the liberation of Poland, and he now becomes the first Prime Minister of a free Poland. Clemenceau, the Premier of France, the defender of the Jewish officer Dreyfuss, victim of one of the greatest scandals of injustice in French history, Clemenceau, "le Père-la-Victoire" (the "Father of Victory"), so named because of his determination as a leader in the First World War, Clemenceau, the "Tiger of France," said of Paderewski that he was the "greatest man" he had ever met.

Charisma is a difficult thing to explain. Like so many things of worth, it is invisible. You cannot touch it or feel it. But character, on the other hand, is forged in the harshness of life – in the denial to oneself of easy things that would take us away from who we are meant to be. An accumulation of such discipline and interior heroism brings the person to a level of goodness and strength that radiates outward like rays from the sun. Arthur Rubinstein said in the first volume of his autobiography that seeing Paderewski walk into a room in his white suite and aureole of red/gold hair was like "looking at the sun!" Perhaps character breeds charisma, and both breed leadership.

Let us now look at a thumbnail sketch of Paderewski's life and at the choices he made. At twenty years of age, he was insignificant in the eyes of the world. He had never been a child prodigy, and the piano was not his only interest, but also composition. When he graduated from the Warsaw Conservatory, it was not with any meteoric accomplishments. Nevertheless, he had his supporters and they gave him a position as an instructor, whereupon he promptly married one of his students, a woman four years his senior by the name of Antonina Korsak. Paderewski now made a decision to live out the remainder of his life quietly, as a teacher, composer and family man. And his pride and exuberance were increased when his wife become with child, giving birth to a son ten months after the marriage. But, tragically, the birth was difficult, the infant was born deformed, and the mother died nine days later from complications. So at twenty, Paderewski's life was shattered. He gave his wife's meager dowry to a trust in Warsaw to help in his mother-in-law's raising of the child, and then left for Germany to change his life and study composition. He remains abroad off and on for four years; he is now twenty four years of age. Then, during a vacation in Zakopane, Poland, the famous Polish actress (famous also in this country in the 1880's for Shakespeare), Helena Modejska, hears him play informally on the piano some of his own compositions. She sees something in him, something about him, and says that he MUST be a pianist, that he must study with the greatest teacher in the world, Theodore Leschetitzky, and she will make it possible. And she does. But after Leschetitzky hears him, he says, "Paderewski, it is too late for you to be a great pianist. Your fingers lack the discipline that they should have received in your formative years." But undeterred, Paderewski begins his studies with a zeal that astounds the old man, practicing long hours each day, absorbing every

detail and transforming himself into a virtuoso. This goes on for a number of years until Leschetitzky finally says it is time for his debut. It is arranged in Paris at a place then called the Salle Erard. And Leschetitzky's wife arranges for the cream of the French musical life to attend.

Names like: Camille Saint-Saens, Vincent D'Indy, Gabriel Faure, Tchaikovsky, Gounod and even the young piano student Alfred Cortot were there. Paderewski mounts the stage... he is nervous, anxious and insecure. He is moving toward thirty years of age. But that debut, even today, is considered one of the most deliriously successful ones in the annals of music history. The Paris correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph* calls him, "the Lion of Paris," as much for his aureole of red/gold hair as for his artistry.

So, at twenty, he is nothing; at thirty he is the 'Lion of Paris'; at forty he is the first star of the twentieth century; and at sixty he is Prime Minister of Poland.

There are those in certain political circles in Washington, who, for varying reasons, believe that artists should have nothing to do with public policy. They will tell you that artists are too "idealistic...too impractical...too pure for the rigors of pragmatism." This point of view is more peculiar to power centers in the United States than in Europe, where Bismark said that every politician in Poland is a poet and every poet is a politician.... and the French have maintained that one of the differences between us and them is that they mourn their artists and bury their politicians, while we mourn our politicians and bury our artists. But for those here who hold a partially negative view of artists in public affairs, the evidence is to the contrary. Vaclav Havel, the great playwright, always outspoken in favor of human rights, became President of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic, thus ushering that country into the modern world and out of the darkness of communist tyranny. Paul Claudel, the great French dramatist and poet, became the French Ambassador to the United States from 1928-1933, and appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1927. He was also responsible for transiting food from South America to France during the First World War, and of bringing the composer Darius Milhaud from South America back to France where he joined *Les six*, and which, led by the poet Jean Cocteau, included other composers like Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric and Francis Poulenc, who reinvigorated French musical culture. Pablo Casals, the iconic cellist, refused for decades to play in countries that recognized Francisco Franco because Franco was a fascist. And then there is Paderewski, the most famous pianist of his day, helping to create a free Poland. These were artists, all of them. And their magnificent accomplishments on the stage of world politics were life-giving, not destructive. And the enormity of it cannot be shunted aside. But those that might try are often, and at the same time ironically attracted to artists. Letitia Baldrige said once at the Library of Congress that, as she helped arrange for Pablo Casals to play at the White House at the invitation of President Kennedy, and after decades of his self imposed exile, everyone from the White House staff to political notables hovered around him, wanting to hear some sounds from his instruments, some words from his lips, or simply to be in his presence. Why? I believe it is because artists, by their very definition, must deal with the truth, whereas politicians often avoid it. The creative process must be deeply honest in order to transmit emotional

authenticity. No sham emotions, ...no half way...and no turning back. And because art is a way of life, integrity infuses the character of the artist, and moral candor is irresistible to those who do not have it. Compromise in public policy? Yes. But not on issues of fundamental individual and human rights. Some will say give them half a loaf and let time heal their wounds. Only small increments to comply with the system. We are used to that. We all know about it, and we are practiced in the lesser of evils. But soon a situation develops that William Butler Yeats described in *The Second Coming*: “The best of us lack all conviction while the worst of us are filled with passionate intensity.” When there are no objective norms, truth becomes a casualty. Was it not the greatest pragmatist of all, Pontius Pilate, who said, “what is truth?” Paderewski knew when he spent himself to make Poland free, Vaclav Havel knew when he presided over the dissolution of the *Warsaw Pact* in Czechoslovakia and the communist empire in Eastern Europe. To give your all! That is the hallmark of an artist, and, incidentally, also of a leader. Arthur Rubinstein said that, “you haven’t played a concert until you’ve lost five pounds and a drop of blood. I think Paderewski would have added, and you can’t free Poland until you’ve risked everything. We have a precious resource in this country, and we must find a way to make better use of that resource, namely our artists. We should use them in an official capacity and otherwise, so that the power of their talent can reach out to the world around us...and, yes, even to listen to them when they speak on matters of national import. I truly believe that this is why Paderewski instituted scholarships for aspiring artists to study international affairs.

Finally, what is Paderewski’s legacy. What will he be remembered for? A performing artist has little to leave behind, since everything is in the moment. We can no longer experience the *panache* or elegance of his stage personality, or the glorious tone that he emitted from this instrument. Such things are now lost in the mist of time. Even his recordings give only a glimpse of the man (And there I would recommend the very first group, made when he was already in his 50s’ and recorded at his villa, *Riond-Bosson*, in Switzerland in 1911). There is his role as a world leader. But because of a variety of circumstances from internal politics to the occupation of Poland by Nazis and communists, and their control of the educational system, this too is now forgotten. It reminds one of the 103rd psalm from Hebrew scripture:

*Man lasts no longer than grass,
No longer than a wild flower he lives,
One gust of wind and he is gone,
Never to be seen there again.*

But here is the great caveat that comes next: *But God’s love lasts forever.*

I believe that we will all be judged in the same way, not by accolades or the lack of them, but by how we have lived our lives. In addition to being a great patriot and artist, Paderewski was an unfailing generous person. He gave to people in all walks of life. After the outbreak of World War I, Paderewski turned over his estate on Lake Geneva to refugees, established the Polish Victims Relief Fund in London, and made an international concert tour during which he passionately urged the liberation of Poland. Indeed, throughout his career he donated an enormous amount of the proceeds from his concerts to charitable causes, from the American Legion’s Orphan and Veteran’s Fund, to money and support to battered women as early as the beginning of the twentieth century.

He also gave to the underprivileged, to students and artists, to cultural exchange initiatives, and on and on. So much so, that at the end of his life he was broke, a pauper, living at the Buckingham hotel in New York City. But still giving as President of the Polish government in exile.

I see Paderewski's life as a continuum. Although he was the principle actor in the creation of a free Poland, and his career as a performing artist was staggering, he was not content with milestones. He went on living out his ideals. Character accumulates. So at the end, 80 years of age and a mere shell of what he had been, he goes out into the world once again. He had been up all night listening to radio reports of the German invasion of Russia. Against doctor's orders and the concern of those around him, he goes to speak at a rally of Polish American veterans of the First World War at Oak ridge, New Jersey, on a blisteringly hot day in June of 1941. He was besieged by thousands of people who tried to get near him, and he nearly fainted. "These are my people," he said. "And this is no ordinary war, it is a question of the whole future." His voice was feeble, but he would not let them down. Back in New York that evening, he fell very ill indeed. Pneumonia set in and within a week he was dead.

Things that are not used tend to spoil like milk that has gone sour. So Paderewski gave of himself until the end. Everything he had: money, talent, spirit, hope; exhausted, extinguished, using his last breath. We are called to do the same: for the person in the sick bed next to us, for those who have lost hope, victims of injustice, the oppressed or the underclass. Abraham Heschel, the Jewish mystic, suggested that our lives should be considered as a piece of marble and we are Michelangelo, and we must create a masterpiece out of that marble... hammering, chiseling and polishing until the very end. Because, he said, whatever we create we may be left with throughout eternity. If that is true, then Paderewski must now be very beautiful to behold as are all good souls. And if, as Thomas Carlyle said, that "music is the speech of angels," then Paderewski still has an audience. Let us hope that when we return to the Author of life, we will be met by a chorus shouting praise and song. A simple lyric...three words will do....WELL DONE CHILD!