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Advocate of the Polish cause Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941)

Ignacy Jan Paderewski was an extraordinary pianist and composer, a devoted patriot and a man of the state, a philanthropist and a social activist. His engagement in the Polish cause was absolutely selfless. He will forever have a place among the great figures who helped Poland in regaining its independence.



He was born and spent his childhood in Kuryłówka in Podole (the lands of the 1st Republic of Poland taken by Russia during the second

partition of the country). There, he received his first education (patriotic, musical, general) and it was there where he first performed publicly. He continued his education in Warsaw, Berlin and Vienna. Soon, he began giving concerts during which he had the chance to meet many famous figures of the international political scene. He quickly became a well-known and appreciated person. He also built up his fame by engaging in charity, showing off his rhetoric skills as well as giving his first political speeches concerning the international situation at the time.

Very well received among Poles living at the Polish territories occupied by the three neighbouring states (Austria-Hungary and the German and Russian Empires) and among those on emigration was the ceremony of the unveiling of the Grunwald memorial in Cracow, on July 15th 1910. The unveiling took place during the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the battle of Grunwald. The idea and funding for the statue came from Paderewski and it was a prelude of sorts for his activities for the Polish cause during the First World War and after.

Diplomacy during time of war

The outbreak of the war found Paderewski in Switzerland, among the relatively small, politically diverse and yet active Polish diaspora. Its representatives – upon hearing about the dramatic economic situation of their countrymen – established the Committee of the Polish Victims' Relief Fund based in Vevey. Paderewski became the honorary deputy president and president of all the branches of the organisation which were to be created in other countries. The Committee promised not to

engage in any political activities in the neutral Switzerland which resulted in the Swiss government officially acknowledging the organisation and enabled the movement to bring humanitarian help for the Polish civilian population.

Paderewski went respectively to Paris and London to establish outposts of the committee there. In both cases, the missions ended with success; however, in order to get the government officials of the two countries to join the committee he had to agree to the presence of the diplomats of Tsarist Russia which was a military ally of Paris and London.

The next stop for Paderewski were the United States (which at the time were also a neutral country), where many – divided among themselves - Polish diaspora organisations were active. Wanting to bring some life into them and unite them around the idea of the Vevey committee the Polish pianist decided to do a tour around all the Polish diaspora centres in the US. During this tour, he negotiated with the representatives of Polish emigrants, gave concerts and delivered fiery speeches. His activities were soon noticed by the American society and the federal authorities, hence the American Committee of the Polish Victims' Relief Fund was established with many famous figures in its ranks.

Nonetheless, the most valuable for the Polish cause was the support of Edward House – a friend and the closest advisor of the US president of that time, Thomas Woodrow Wilson. Thanks to House's endorsement, Paderewski had the opportunity to meet president Wilson twice in

1916. During these conversations, Paderewski officially represented the Polish diaspora, as he had become the president of the Polish National Department not so long before. It was a political organisation, sprouting from the charity activities of the Polish Central Relief Committee. This committee was uniting those members of the Polish diaspora in the US who sympathised with the Entente.

At the beginning of January 1917, House asked Paderewski to quickly prepare a letter describing all important Polish affairs which he would later present to the president. Paderewski wrote two texts in little to no time (basing them on various statistical and historical materials): one dated on January 11th 1917; one without a date prepared between 11th and 22nd of January 1917. There, he described the history of Polish lands, the situation in all the occupied territories and the proposition of the future borders of reborn Poland. Although there is no way to prove this, there is a strong possibility that the two texts influenced – at least indirectly – president Wilson’s speeches to the American senate. The first speech, from January 22nd 1917, had the words “all politicians agree, that an independent, united Poland should exist”. The second one, delivered on January 7th 1918, and widely known as the fourteen points peace program for after the First World War, had a sentence (in the thirteenth point): “An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant”. Especially the second statement, delivered when the United States had already

joined the war, strengthened the support for the Polish cause on the international political scene.

Another field of Paderewski's work was trying to create a Polish army in the United States – only as independent military, not as auxiliary units of the allied armies. Unfortunately, these attempts were met with strong denial from the American officials, including president Wilson. No sooner, than in the autumn of 1917 had they agreed to enlist volunteers among the American citizens of Polish origin who were not eligible for recruitment to the US military, and send them to the newly created Polish army in France.

Prior to that, in August 1917, in the Swiss Lausanne the Polish National Committee was established, whose founders had the ambition to represent all Polish affairs on the international scene (its headquarters were soon moved to Paris). Its president became Roman Dmowski, the leader of the Polish national democratic movement. Not long after, the Entente states acknowledged the committee as the official representation of Polish interests. The function of the committee's representative in the US was offered to Paderewski who at the same time continued to organise financial help for Polish lands and encouraged his compatriots to volunteer to the Polish army. Even though, the collections brought little effect, the number of volunteers declaring the will to join the Polish military was much bigger than expected.

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