

OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

POLONAISE

WHEN I alighted from a train at the Warsaw railroad station early one morning a few weeks ago, I squeezed myself into one of those ramshackle miniature conveyances that the people of Warsaw optimistically call taxicabs and told the driver, a heavy man in dire need of a shave, to take me to the Hotel Bristol. He nodded, and kicked at the starter, which did not respond. He said "*Psia krew!*" ("Dog's blood!"), a popular Polish curse, and kept kicking until the motor caught. It was six-thirty. A rather warm wind blew clouds of dust from the enormous heaps of rubble and from the jagged, windowless ruins of the city. I had been sitting up all night on the train and was so tired that I dozed off. I awoke with a jolt when the taxi stopped. I started to get out, but then I saw that we were in front of a church, not a hotel.

"The Church of the Holy Cross," the driver said. "Does the gentleman want to take a look?"

"Certainly not," I said. "I want to go to the Bristol."

"Oh, the hotel is across the street," he said nonchalantly, and settled the question of where I was going by getting out and opening the door. "This is the church where the heart of Chopin is buried. I've been wanting to come here myself for some time, but I'm hardly ever in this neighborhood. The gentleman's bags will be safe, and I won't charge for the waiting time."

So I got out, too, and the driver and I walked up a makeshift wooden stairway built over the stone steps of the church, and went inside. It was quiet and cool there. The driver crossed himself and knelt for a moment in prayer. I saw people on their knees praying before the main altar. The driver stood up and touched my arm gently. "There it is," he said, pointing to a short white column with a bust of Chopin on the top. There was a niche in the column, containing flowers. On a metal tablet at the base of the column was an inscription in Polish, which can be translated as "My heart will remain with you." "Those were the last words of Chopin before he left Poland and went to France," the driver said. "Beats me why he spent the best years of his life there." He shook his head. "Well, the French couldn't take his heart away from us. Neither could the Germans or the Russians." He started to curse again, but then piously checked himself. "It's buried here in Poland, where it belongs."

An organ began to play. We listened for a few minutes, and then we left. I asked the driver if he liked Chopin's music. He looked surprised. "Frankly, I don't care much for music," he said. He opened the taxi door and waited patiently until I got both legs and the rest of my body in. "The gentleman understands, doesn't he, that this is our official Chopin Year? Chopin died a hundred years ago, on October 17th, in

Paris." He pointed back over his shoulder. "They took his heart—"

"I know," I said hurriedly.

"And now we'll go over to the Bristol," he said amiably.

On the wall of my room there was a chiaroscuro portrait of Chopin. I slept most of the day, then took a walk before dinner. I noticed a great many posters announcing Chopin Year.

THAT night, when I went back to the hotel, the clerk behind the desk asked, as he handed me my room key, "Has the gentleman seen a little of Warsaw?"

"Yes."

"I suppose the gentleman has been in the church where Frédéric Chopin—"

"The Church of the Holy Cross?" I said as I started to turn away. "Yes. I was there this morning. Good night."

"No, no, no," he said quickly, giving me the half-tolerant, half-annoyed stare that is a hallmark of civilized desk clerks all over the world. "If the gentleman doesn't mind, I did not mean that church." He came out from behind the desk and led me to the entrance. "The Order of the Visitation Church," he said, pointing out another church, a block away. "Young Chopin used to play the organ there at his school Mass. The organ has a beautiful tone. Sometimes when I listen to it, I wish I had been there when young Chopin played it. He lived most of his early life in this district, part of the time on Krakowskie Przedmieście, not far from the Warsaw Conservatory, where he studied composition with Professor Joseph Elsner. Elsner wrote on Chopin's report card, 'Unusual talent—musical genius.' " He added apologetically, "My wife buys all those Chopin books, and I read them. I don't bore the gentleman?"

I said no.

"Does the gentleman see that three-story house, the second one this side of the Church of the Holy Cross? Chopin lived there, too—from 1827 to 1830. He wrote the F-Minor Concerto there." The clerk had started to hum the theme from the first movement when a couple of people came in. He excused himself and returned to the desk.

I went to the Order of the Visitation Church the next morning and listened to the beautiful music of the organ. When I went out, a lean man glanced sharply at my hat and shoes and asked me if I had seen the Church of the Holy Cross, where Chopin's heart— I told him I had and walked rapidly away. At the Polski Bank, where I changed some dollars into zlotys, the teller at the for-



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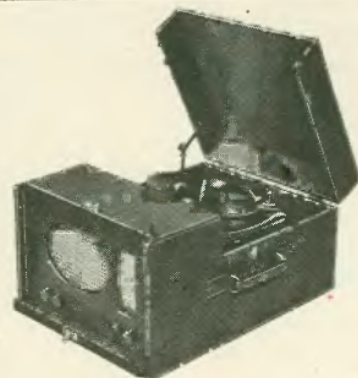
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sign-exchange window asked me if I had been to the Frédéric Chopin Institute. It was at 15 Zgoda Street, he said, and he looked perfectly willing to leave his cage to show me where it was. At the office of a man I had promised to look up, I was told by his secretary that he was in Switzerland—something to do with publicizing Chopin Year, she said. In the café where I had lunch, the pianist played Chopin's B-Minor Scherzo and two of his mazurkas. The pianist was so good that after lunch, with a feeling that I couldn't buck this thing any longer, I took a cab to 15 Zgoda Street.

THE Frédéric Chopin Institute* is on the third floor of a dingy, bomb-blasted house. A tall, unsmiling man with a military bearing and a large mustache said that he was Stefan Rakowski, secretary of the Institute. "Mr. Rudnicki, our director, happens to be in Cracow," he said solemnly, "but it will be my gratification to guide you around, sir. *Sso!*" He spoke an overly careful but awkward English, and he frequently ended a thought with a gusty "*Sso!*" that ruffled the fringes of his mustache.

The Frédéric Chopin Institute was founded in 1934 by the Polish government, I learned, to collect Chopin manuscripts and other relics, put on concerts of his lesser-known as well as his better-known compositions, publish his works, and serve as a museum and propaganda bureau for Poland's greatest composer. Before the war, the Institute had splendid quarters, Rakowski told me, but now it has only two rooms. The one we were in, the office, had white-washed walls, a few desks, an old-fashioned telephone that was constantly ringing, and a couple of battered typewriters. It was crowded with stacks of pamphlets, pictures, and posters. A young girl, who acted as a secretary and clerk, answered the telephone. The place looked like the campaign headquarters of a minor political party. On one wall was a print of a Chopin portrait and a United Nations poster.

"This is our big year," Rakowski said, unnecessarily. "Please be seated. You know, of course, about the Chopin Year. On February 22nd, which was the hundred-and-thirty-ninth anniversary of Chopin's birth, the opening celebrations were held in the village of Zelazowa Wola, where he was born, and at the church where he was christened, in Brochów. There was a big concert here in Warsaw that night, in Roma Hall, with a performance of the E-Minor and F-Minor Concertos by two of our finest



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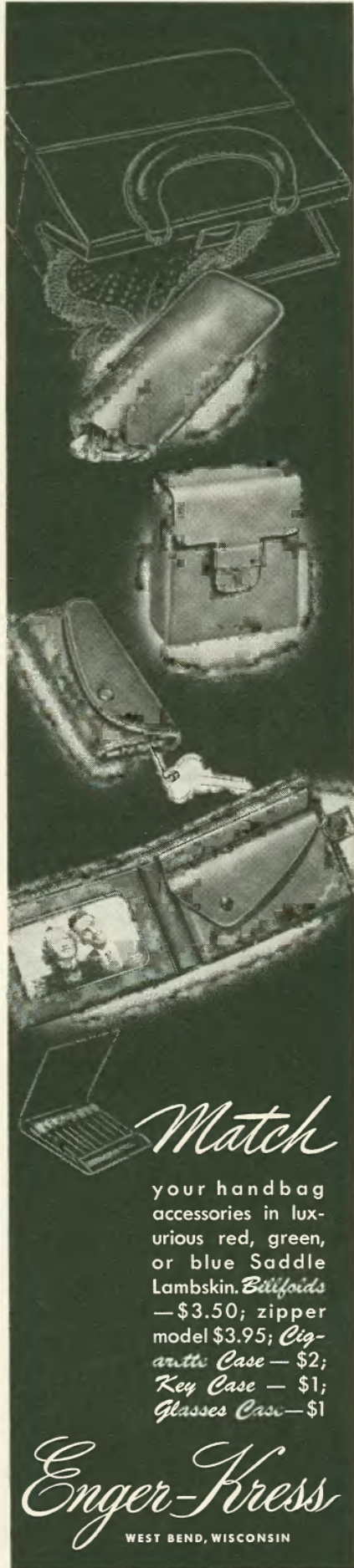
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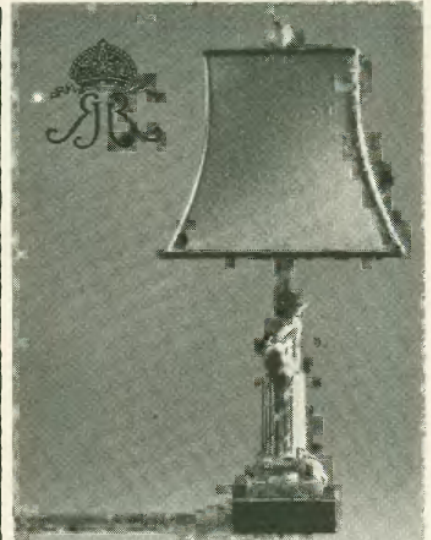
pianists, Jan Ekier and Zbigniew Drzewiecki. It should be emphasized," Rakowski continued, as he settled himself in his chair, "that the most important part of the program of the Chopin Year is concerts—historical concerts and a series of concerts that we call the Living Edition of Chopin's Work." Like most Poles, he pronounced the name "Shop-pen." "The Living Edition concerts, which are presenting a complete cycle of Chopin's works, are given at Roma Hall, and they are being broadcast over the radio. The historical concerts are, so to say, duplications of concerts that Chopin gave. They are being held in the towns where he played—usually in the same halls, if they still exist—and the programs are the very same ones that he performed. For instance, on March 17th the program that Chopin gave on March 17, 1830, at the National Theatre was repeated—the Concerto in F Minor and the Grand Fantasy on Polish Airs, Opus 13. Our National Theatre has been destroyed, so the performance was given at Roma Hall. On April 26th, our famous pianist Henryk Sztopmka replayed, at the Paris Conservatory, the program Chopin gave on April 26, 1841, at the Salle Pleyel. On May 15th, Stanislaw Szpinalski duplicated the program that Chopin played on May 15, 1848, in the presence of Queen Victoria, at the residence of the Duchess of Sutherland in London—"

"I'm afraid I'll have to—" I said. "Ah, what an audience it must have been at the Pleyel!" Rakowski went on. "Mme. Sand was there, Franz Liszt, Hector Berlioz, Heinrich Heine, Delacroix, the great Polish poets Mickiewicz and Witwicki. Chopin played his own works."

The young secretary called Rakowski to the phone. He shrugged impatiently and said, "Excuse myself, sir." He was back in a moment and asked me to go into the other room, which was a big one, across a narrow corridor. It looked like a run-down antique shop. Mirrors, paintings, vases, and tables were scattered all over it. There were four or five irregular rows of wooden chairs, as well as four pianos—one against each wall.

A tall, gray-haired lady with a regal air and a longish Renaissance face entered. Rakowski bowed deeply, kissed her hand, and introduced her as Mme. Louise Ciechomska. "The only living descendant of the Chopin family," he said. "Mme. Ciechomska works here at the Institute."

Mme. Ciechomska acknowledged



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Rakowski's words with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. "I'm not what you would call a close relative," she said. "Papa was the grandson of Chopin's eldest sister, Louise, who was married to Professor Kalasante Jedrzejewicz. Papa knew a lot of stories about Frédéric. He always said that my great-granduncle was really a little mixed up. All those women, you know. Mme. Sand, Maria Wodzińska, Countess Delfine Potocka."

"You don't have to be mixed up to fall in love with attractive women," Rakowski said sternly. "So!" We laughed, but his grave expression did not relax.

"I'm ashamed to confess that I don't even play the piano," said Mme. Ciechomska.

"You don't have to play the piano to admire the greatness of Chopin," said Rakowski, with some heat. "Remember the words of George Sand, 'He's more Polish than Poland itself.' And Stanislaw Przybyszewski, the writer, says, 'We are indebted—'"

Mme. Ciechomska laughed. "Mr. Rakowski is a romantic," she said to me, and she put her hand on his arm.

"Yes, Madame," he said. "I confess to being a hopeless romantic, like every Pole. That, sir, is our great strength—and our weakness. So!" He looked out the window at the broken walls and the wild flowers growing in the rubble. He waved his hand. "Maybe I ought to be out there now laying bricks, helping to rebuild our capital. But, rightly or wrongly, I feel that this work is just as important. It is very sad to think how many of the things that Chopin once owned we once had, and how little we have now. All the manuscripts, the letters, his sister's diary—gone. The Germans took them. Today there are Chopin manuscripts everywhere—in France, Canada, America—yes, everywhere except in Poland. We have just these odds and ends." He pointed to a Louis XIV armchair with faded silver upholstery, in a corner that had been roped off. "This chair, for example, came from the room at 12 Place Vendôme, in Paris, where he died." We all looked at the chair.

A hollow-cheeked young man with long, tousled hair and wild eyes came in, ignoring us fiercely. He went to one end of the room, sat down at the piano there, and began to play Chopin's "Rondo Krakowiak." He had great verve and excellent technique.

"Some very gifted pianists come to practice here," Rakowski said. "There is still a bad need for pianos in Warsaw,

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and most of the students don't have one at home. I tell you, there may be a lack of pianos, but there is no lack of talent. There are probably more first-rate pianists in Warsaw now than in any other city in Europe—artists like Jan Ekier, Stanislaw Szpinalski, Henryk Sztompka, Boleslaw Woytowicz." He seemed a little more cheerful. In a moment, he went back to the office and returned with several volumes of music. "Everything Chopin ever wrote," he said. "All his preludes, études, ballades, impromptus, scherzos, sonatas, nocturnes, polonaises, valse, mazurkas, concertos—*everything*. Paderewski worked on it for years, after he gave up his concert career. After his death, others finished the job. Then the Germans came. The manuscripts were hidden in the basement of a house in the suburbs. The house was destroyed, but not the basement. *Sso!* We have now published the first six volumes. By 1951, the whole twenty-six volumes will be ready. We will publish sixty thousand sets in foreign languages."

"These books are only a part of our long-term program," Mme. Ciechomska said. "We are planning radio broadcasts, and putting out films, poems, postcards, booklets, and novels. There are Chopin anthologies, Chopin calendars, Chopin masks, Chopin busts, Chopin souvenirs—all that sort of thing." I remarked that I hadn't fully realized the depth of the Poles' feeling for Chopin. Mme. Ciechomska smiled. "You must go out to his birthplace, in Zelazowa Wola," she said. "It's beautiful-out there." Zelazowa Wola is a tiny village thirty-five miles west of Warsaw, on the road to Poznań.

Rakowski clapped his hands. "Why don't I take you tomorrow morning?" he said. "Tomorrow is Sunday, and there is a concert every Sunday afternoon. Professor Staniewicz is going to play tomorrow. I shall try to get a car for eight o'clock in the morning. *Sso!*" By now I felt that my time was Chopin's time, and I agreed to go.

RAKOWSKI telephoned me the next morning and said he was unable to get a car. "The buses are dangerously overcrowded and they wouldn't be pleasant," he said. "Everybody wants to go out there. Last month, there were a hundred and sixty thousand visitors." I said I would see what I could do. A friend of mine at the American Embassy let me have an Embassy car, with a driver, and by nine o'clock we were on our way. Rakowski

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looked a bit more relaxed than he had been the day before, but he was still sombre.

The countryside was peaceful and friendly. We passed barefoot children playing in front of miserable farmhouses. Rakowski looked out, but he didn't seem to see the scenery until we came to the plains near Zelazowa Wola. "I suppose the mazurkas that Chopin wrote many years later in Paris were born here," he said. "He was the friend of Heine, Liszt, and Delacroix, but his heart was always here, near the places of his childhood."

After a few miles, our driver turned off the paved highway, at Rakowski's direction, onto a dirt road. Ahead of us was an open truck crammed with school children waving small Polish flags and singing gaily. The truck sent up clouds of dust, but neither our driver nor Rakowski was bothered by it. "The children come from all over Poland to pay honor to Chopin," said Rakowski. "Most of them have never heard his music, I imagine, but it's a good thing for them to come here."

In Zelazowa Wola, we got out at the gate of a big park. Beside the gate was a small building in which a peasant girl with a colored kerchief over her head was selling postcards, souvenirs, and glasses of sour milk. There were thousands of trees, flowers, and bushes in the park, and an air of peace and charm. Rakowski said that each of the ten thousand cities, towns, and villages in Poland had contributed a tree or a shrub to Chopin Park, which is a national shrine. "We have two pine trees from America, too," he said proudly. "From the Roxy Mountains." We walked for a while. In a clearing, we came upon a one-story white frame house with two chimneys. It had flower beds, a large flagstone terrace, and ivy on its walls, and it looked very much like a modest country place in Connecticut. It was Chopin's birthplace.

"This hasn't been a happy house, sir," Rakowski said, gloomily. "The bricks of the foundation are still the same, but everything else has been changed. During the First World War, the German or the Austrian or the Russian Army—I don't know which one, so many foreign armies have fought on Poland's soil—burned it down. It was rebuilt in time for the Second World War and the Germans. You should have seen it in 1945! The roof was demolished, the doors were shattered, and the only piece of furniture left was the shell of a piano, without strings or legs—all that remained of the instrument on which

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young Frédéric took his first lessons. The house was completely rebuilt, and the National Museum, in Warsaw, lent furniture in the style of the period, but you must not look for historical truth, sir. What you will find is truth of the spirit. *Sso!*"

The school children were coming along the flagstone terrace now. They walked two by two, timidly, some on tiptoe, as though they were about to go into a church. They began to file in behind a man who I suppose was their teacher, the boys wearing the blue caps worn by all schoolboys in Poland, the girls in creaking new white shoes and white stockings, with their pigtailed tied with colored ribbons. At the entrance, a white-haired lady took them in hand.

Rakowski and I followed them. The house smelled pleasantly of wood, and I noticed that the floors and the heavy wooden beams of the ceilings were all new. There was a small foyer and then a cheerful sitting room with a fireplace. On one wall of this room hung a copy of the famous Chopin portrait by his friend Delacroix—the original is in the Louvre—which shows the composer in the depths of his physical and emotional suffering. The music room, which was next and projected into the garden, had windows on three sides. The draped curtains were white and freshly starched, and the furniture, upholstered in blue and pink, was Empire. The piano—an American Steinway—was locked. It wouldn't be opened until time for the recital, Rakowski said.

The children crowded into the room beyond, which was furnished in Biedermeier and also contained an eighteenth-century upright piano of the type that was called "giraffe," because of its height. The white-haired woman said that this room had been used by Chopin's mother—that she had done her knitting and embroidering there. She opened a small chest of drawers and pressed a concealed button inside. A couple of secret compartments sprang open. The children were fascinated. "Does anybody know what this is for?" the woman asked the group of children, pointing to another piece of furniture. Nobody answered. "It's a writing table, or *bu-reau*," she said.

"Poor children!" Rakowski said to me. "They've never seen such furniture. Where they come from, people have a bed, a couple of chairs, and a table—sometimes not even a table. The Polish people are very poor, sir."

Most of the youngsters were standing around the writing table, reverently



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fingering it. A small girl was staring at a death mask of Chopin that stood in a niche on one wall. I asked her whether she or any of the other children played any instrument. She shook her head. "We have no piano. I have heard music on the radio, though. I can sing the Polonaise," she said, and began to sing Chopin's Grand Fantasy on Polish Airs.

A small boy turned toward her. "That's not the Polonaise," he said with contempt. "Girls know nothing."

"Quiet, children," said the woman. She walked to an alcove and drew back a red curtain, exposing a marble tablet inscribed, in Polish, "Here Frédéric Chopin was born, on February 22, 1810."

"Yes, children," said the woman. "Here, in this alcove, our great Chopin first saw the light of the world."

It had become very still in the room. The secret drawers and the writing table had lost their attraction for the children. They stood motionless, staring at the alcove and at a white marble vase on its floor, filled with white wild roses and with peonies. Next to me, a boy who looked about seven was spelling out the inscription.

"You see those roses?" Rakowski whispered. "They grew in the park. The gardener told me that roses were Chopin's favorite flowers. He said his grandfather had told him so. Well, at the beginning of the war those wild rosebushes stopped blooming. Just stopped. A few months ago, they began to bloom again. You can ask the gardener if it is not so."

We went through the nursery and the father's study, and then returned to the foyer, where the young visitors were writing their names in the big guestbook. After a minute or two, we went outside. People were pouring into the park. Families sat on the lawn opening picnic baskets containing bread, sausage, sardines, and hard-boiled eggs. Young couples were strolling arm in arm, and groups of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts were marching around. Rakowski and I went into an older, less carefully tended part of the park, and came to a small stream. "The Utrata River," said Rakowski. "Chopin used to swim here as a child. Across the river, the park has been built up like an amphitheatre. When it is beautiful outside, the piano is carried out and the artists perform under the trees. The acoustics are marvellous. Here one can feel how close Chopin's music is to the earth of Poland. I guess that Chopin would

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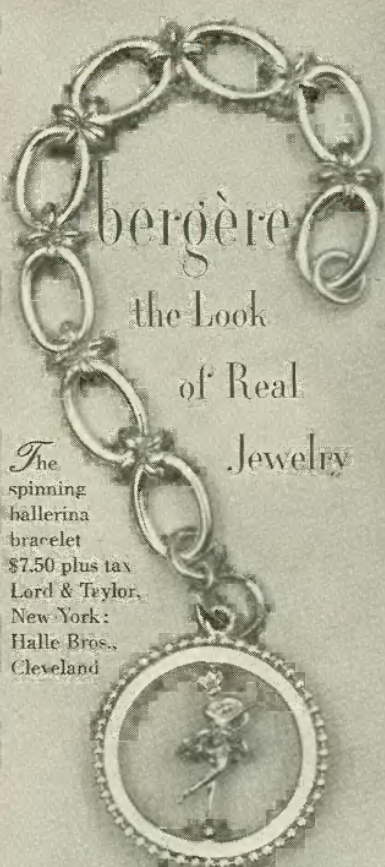
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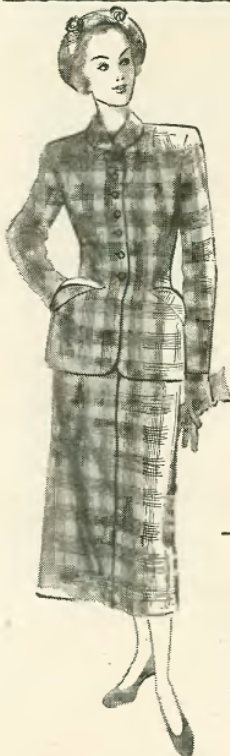
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have liked having his music performed here."

We walked back to the house. The crowd was still growing, and hundreds of children were running about, but they were well behaved. Behind a hedge at the side of the house stood a bald-headed man with horn-rimmed glasses and a dark-blue double-breasted suit, lost in thought. He was, Rakowski said, Professor Stanislaw Staniewicz, of the Warsaw Conservatory. He would play Chopin all afternoon.

We walked over to him. "What are you going to play, Professor?" asked Rakowski.

The pianist looked at us distractedly. "I'm just trying to decide," he said. He was obviously unhappy about making conversation just before his performance. "It's always difficult to start. Once one has started, everything comes by itself. There is so much—*atmosphere* here. We should give all our concerts here, and not in Roma Hall. Yes, everything comes by itself here." He paused, then said suddenly, "I believe I will start with the E-Minor Prelude. Too bad the piano here is a Steinway."

"In America," I said, "it is considered a very good instrument."

"I agree. But for this small house its sound is too strong. A Pleyel would be more intimate. Chopin played much on Pleyel pianos. We try to keep up the tradition. And now, if you will excuse me, I think it's time to begin."

RAKOWSKI and I went to the garden behind the house and sat down on a stone bench between a restless red-haired man, who was nervously snapping his braces, and a fragile old lady in a black silk dress. She wore a hat, black gloves, and a velvet band around her throat. There was an umbrella in her lap, and she was eating a sandwich out of a newspaper wrapping. She asked politely whether we minded her eating, and smiled when we said no.

Through the open windows of the music room we saw Professor Staniewicz moving toward the piano, and heard him begin the Prelude in E Minor. The people on the lawn stopped eating, and the young couples under the trees put their heads together and closed their eyes. The red-headed man stopped playing with his braces, left the bench, and lay flat on his back on the flagstones. The children sat down without being told to.

I don't remember the exact sequence of Professor Staniewicz's program, but he played one of the famous nocturnes



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(from Opus 9), the Impromptu in F Sharp Major (Opus 36), a couple of études, and a mazurka, and then launched into the Polonaise in A Flat Major. More people arrived, in silence, and sat down on the flagstone terrace and in the garden. There were no sounds now except the music and the play of the wind in the trees and the singing of the birds. I concluded that Rakowski was right, that Chopin would have liked having his music performed here. Looking at these people, who had come out of their moist cellars and dusty attics, away from their ruins and rubble, I realized that to them Chopin meant something more than music.

Beside me, Mr. Rakowski was stirring. "Isn't this beautiful?" he whispered. I looked at him. His eyes were closed, and now there was a smile on his face.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

HOW TO KEEP AWAKE WHILE READING

MORTIMER J. ADLER

I have one simple rule for keeping awake while reading. It underlies every other rule for successful reading. *You must ask questions while you read—questions which you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading.* Asking and answering questions is what pays the dividends in reading, and makes it worthwhile.

Any questions? No. The art of reading consists of the habit of asking the right questions in the right order. Here are the four main questions you must ask about any nonfiction book:

1. *What is the book as a whole about?* Here you must try to discover the leading theme of the book, and how the author develops this theme in an orderly way by subdividing it into essential subordinate topics.

2. *What in detail is being said, and how?* Here you must try to underline for yourself—with a pencil, perhaps, or mentally if the book is borrowed—the main ideas, assertions, and arguments that constitute the author's particular message.

3. *Is it true, in whole or part?* You cannot answer this question until you have answered the first two. You have to know *what* is being said—and to do that you must...—*Cosmopolitan.*

Z-z-z-z.

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[From Cue]

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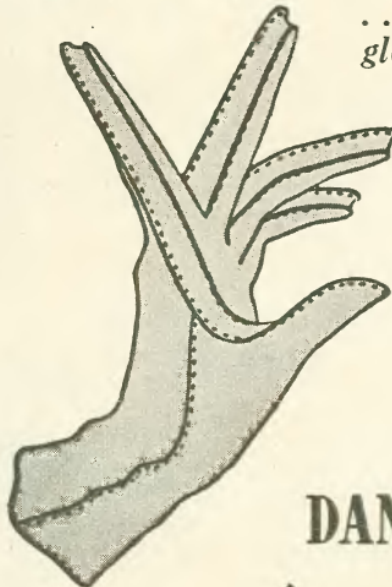
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