

A SKETCH OF POLISH CULTURE

For the past five years, the interest of the world has been centered upon the little country of Poland. Seldom, we might say, has so small a nation taken the attention of all in Poland much has been written and said about her. We have been informed of how many times she saved Europe from invasion, of how she maintained her nationality when all the world would have said she was a nation no more, of how she emerged from her ordeal in 1918 to take her place proudly among other nations of the world. Unfortunately, this is all that most people have learned about this small nation. History, politics, and economics comprise the sum total of all that has lately been said about her.

Now at the present time, when this country is about to be delivered out of the aggressors' hands, would it not be worth while to investigate a little more closely the reasons why this gallant little country merits the best efforts of her own and other people? She deserves our aid if only as a mark of gratitude for what she has done in the present conflict and for what she has done in the past. But she has other claims upon the gratitude of the world. She has given us cultural treasures of great and lasting value. It may be that we know little of these, but we cannot blame the giver. We should seek and find them.

Polish literature may be considered first as an important contribution to world culture. At the present time this literature is not very well known outside scholastic circles. This may be because the Polish language is little known in other countries. The Polish language is truly a beautiful one and may come to its own when Poland again takes her place among the nations of the world. But in the meantime translations are always available and these deserve to be read more widely than they have been in the past.

Polish literature does not date back as far as that of most countries. The Poles had, indeed, some poetry, but very little of that is known today. The first great writers of note appeared in the Golden Age of Polish literature in the sixteenth century. The two great writers were Nicholas Rej and Jan Kachonowski. In the seventeenth century there was little literary activity, but in the eighteenth century came a re-

vival which was encouraged by one of their kings, Stanislaus Poniatowski. One of the most outstanding figures of this revival, and, indeed, of all Polish literature, was Ignace Krasicki, an archbishop. He worked with several literary forms and achieved his greatest success with satire. He was also famous for his fables, which rank with those of La-Fontaine.

The greatest Polish poetry was produced during the period of Romanticism in Poland. This period, extending roughly from 1820 to 1850, was the most important in the cultural history of the country. The pioneer of this period was Malczewski, who wrote *Marya*, the first romantic poem written in Poland. Three very important men followed him, Mickiewicz, Krasinski, and Slowacki. After these men had written, Polish literature could hold its head high and look any national literature in the face.

The first of these men, Adam Mickiewicz, was undoubtedly the greatest. He is even considered by some as the greatest genius Poland has ever produced. He was born in Lithuania, then a part of Poland. He drew most of his material from the folklore of his country. He spent most of his life in exile. In his later years, he was professor of Slavonic literature at the College de France, where his lectures were attended by some of the greatest men of his time. His works are numerous and can be mentioned only briefly here. They include *Ode to Youth*, *Crimean Sonnets*, and *Konrad Wallenrod*, the story of a Lithuanian patriot. His masterpiece was *Thaddeus* or *Pan Tadeusz*, the great glory of Polish literature. It deals with life in Poland in 1812, the year when Poland was expecting such great things from Napoleon. The poem is characterized by a great power of description and patriotism. The second great poet, Slowacki, was much like Shelley. *King Spirit*, the longest of his many works, deals with the heroes of his country. Beauty of language characterizes all his works. Krasinski, the third, may not be as good as his contemporaries, but still is of great importance. His chief works were *The Undivine Comedy*, *Psalms of the Future*, and *Resurrecturis*.

The most famous figure in modern Polish literature was Henryk Sienkiewicz, a man whose name is known to all the civilized world. His masterpiece, *Quo Vadis*, for which he re-

ceived the Nobel Prize for literature, has been translated into more languages than any other book except the Bible. He has also given the world other historical novels including *With Fire and Sword*, *The Deluge*, and *Pan Wolodyowski*.

There is still one name which should never be forgotten where Polish literary men are mentioned. It is that of Joseph Conrad, whom England claims by virtue of his having written in England. But we must not forget that it was Poland who gave us this man of whom we are so justly proud.

In the realm of art, Poland is also famous. In the field of architecture, her achievements date back to the eleventh century, and their crowning glory is the Wawel of the city of Cracow. The Wawel consists of a castle and a cathedral. The cathedral of Warsaw and Vilna are also worthy of mention. They were built in the national style known as Vistula Gothic.

Poland's contribution to music is also classed as highly as that of any country. Some even say that her music surpasses the importance of her art and literature. Indeed, no Polish writer is so famous as the composer Frederic Chopin. During the reign of King Stanislaus Poniatowski, Polish national opera came into being. Here the chief name is Moniuszka, who stands second only to Chopin among the composers of the country. But here we should stop and say a few words about Chopin, whom Poland claims as her own, despite the share France had in him. His music is nationalistic in both form and atmosphere. It was he who embodied the spirit of a nation in music for the first time. In his music we find the perfect union of art and nature.

We can conclude by saying that these people typify Poland's gift to the culture of the world. How different would be the world of letters, art, and music, without Poland's contribution. And the Polish people are certain now, as they have been certain throughout the ages that the faith embodied in the works of such men will not be in vain. Let us all hope and pray that Poland will rise again in a new world where there will be freedom and justice for her and for all people.

GEORGE SMITH, '46.