

Some Famous Poles



COPERNICUS, NICHOLAS, or Mikolaj Kopernik (1473-1543) — Born in Poland, founder of modern astronomy. Copernicus attended the university at Krakow in 1491, then spent several years in Italy where he studied medicine and canon law. His major interest, however, was mathematics and he ultimately specialized in astronomy.

Contrary to the theories of his day, which placed the earth in the center of the universe, Copernicus launched a scientific revolution when he placed the sun in the center and reduced the earth to the position of a planet revolving around the sun.

Though now universally accepted, Copernicus' theory endured the initial opposition of fellow scientists, the denial of man's senses suggesting the sun went around the earth, and the wrath of theologians like Martin Luther who stated: "this fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth."

KOSCIUSZKO (pronounced KOS-CHOOS-KO), THADDEUS, or Tadeusz (1746-1817) — Born of impoverished landed gentry in the eastern Polish province of Polesie on February 4, 1746, Thaddeus

Kosciuszko, a military engineer, became one of the 18th century's greatest champions of American and Polish freedom. One of the first foreign volunteers to come to the aid of the American revolutionary army, Kosciuszko made many significant contributions to the American Revolution including the fortifications at Saratoga and West Point. At war's end, he was promoted to Brigadier General and received Congressional recognition honoring his "meritorious service."



Following the war, Kosciuszko returned to his homeland to fight the occupying Russians. After being wounded 17 times during the battle of Maciejowice in 1794, the bleeding Kosciuszko was taken prisoner by the Russians. After two years in prison, Czar Paul granted the Pole amnesty on the condition he never return to his homeland.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko once again set off for to America, but yearning for Poland, he left the United States in 1798. On his departure from America Kosciuszko declared Thomas Jefferson to be the executor of his estate, and urged him to purchase slaves and grant them liberty in his (Kosciuszko's) name. He never was able to return to his homeland and died in exile in Switzerland in 1817.

The two worlds of Kosciuszko were in sharp contrast. The revolution he helped lead in Poland in the early 1790's was crushed; an exile from Poland, Kosciuszko was a hero in the United States. The life and work of this Polish-born patriot is commemorated at the Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial located in Philadelphia. Among the many monuments named after him, the best known are the ones found in front of the White House and another found in West Point.



CHOPIN, FREDERIC, or Fryderyk (1809-49) — Polish composer and pianist born near Warsaw. Chopin started playing piano at the age of 4, first appeared in public when he was 9 and at 19 went on his first concert tour. One of the great composers of the romantic period, he wrote more than 200 works for the piano, including nocturnes, mazurkas, waltzes, and ballads. For harmony and rhythms he often turned to the folk music of his native Poland.

Despite the lively musical life of Warsaw, Chopin urgently needed wider musical experience, and so his devoted parents found money to send him to Vienna. On a subsequent trip to Germany and Italy, news reached him of the Polish revolt against Russian rule. The ruling Russian powers in Poland refused to allow him to return, and because of this and the general turmoil that existed in Europe at the time, Chopin spent most of the rest of his life in exile.

Chopin soon found himself in Paris, the centre of European culture and the Romantic movement, where he discovered the the right atmosphere for his abilities. He quickly established ties with many Polish émigrés and with a younger generation of composers, including Franz Liszt, Hector Berlioz, Vincenzo Bellini, and Felix Mendelssohn. Paris celebrated the genius of the young composer, and Chopin began to concentrate on the central passions of his life—teaching and composing.

An introduction to the wealthy Rothschild banking family helped Chopin move ahead even further. With his refined manners and sensitivity, Chopin found himself a favourite in the great houses of Paris, both as a recitalist and as a teacher. His new piano works at this time included two books of études (1829-36), the Ballade in G Minor (1831-35), the Fantaisie-Impromptu, and many smaller pieces, among them mazurkas and polonaises inspired by Chopin's strong nationalist feeling.

Toward the end of his life, Chopin's health deteriorated rapidly. He made his last public appearance on a concert platform at the Guildhall in London on Nov. 16, 1848, when, in a final patriotic gesture, he played for the benefit of Polish refugees. He returned to Paris, where he died the following year; he was buried at the cemetery of Père Lachaise. However, he requested that his heart be buried in his native Polish soil. During WWII, in an attempt to destroy Polish cultural life, the Nazis forbade the playing of Chopin's music.

MAURYCY GOTTLIEB (1856-1879) One of eleven children, Maurycy Gottlieb was born in Drohobycz, Poland, and enrolled at the Vienna Art Academy at age fifteen.

He later studied under Polish painter Jan Matejko in Krakow, but quit Matejko's studio after repeatedly experiencing anti-Semitism from other art students. Gottlieb returned to Vienna to search for his Jewish roots. Yet, despite his encounters with anti-Semitism, Gottlieb maintained a love and admiration for Poland. At the age of twenty he was awarded a gold medal at a Munich art competition for the painting *Shylock and Jessica*, taken from Shakespeare's play *Merchant of Venice*. The face for Jessica was modeled on Laura Rosenfeld, the unmarried daughter of a prosperous merchant family of Vienna to whom Gottlieb had proposed marriage.

According to some sources, upon hearing of Laura Rosenfeld's marriage to a banker of Berlin, Gottlieb took his own life. (Laura Rosenfeld herself was later deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz in 1944, and perished on route.) As a Polish-Jewish artist, Gottlieb is unique. As a Polish painter, he is considered to be the best of his generation.

Today, his paintings are to found in museums throughout Eastern Europe. He is also regarded by many as the "father of national Jewish art" and has been referred to as the "Jewish Rembrandt". His painting of Jesus, (*Jesus preaching at Capernaum*) an unusual subject for a Jewish artist before the 20th Century, depicts Jesus with prayer shawl & earlocks, speaking in synagogue.



In "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on the Day of Atonement" Gottlieb depicted himself as a child, youth and old man praying.

image: Jewish Virtual Library

Though a secular Jew he steadily looked back toward a heritage as a source for his inspiration. His most famous painting, "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on the Day of Atonement" depicts himself as a child, youth and old man praying on this holy day. Also depicted in the painting in the woman's gallery is Laura Rosenfeld, whose later rejection caused his suspected suicide at age 23. The large-size painting now hangs in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and is among its most celebrated works. A street in Jerusalem is named after the painter, and his "Day of Atonement" painting was also featured on an Israeli postage stamp.



JOSEPH CONRAD (1857-1924) Joseph Conrad was born in Berdichev, Poland in 1857. His original name was Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. He is best known for his novels "Lord Jim" (1900), "Nostromo" (1904) and "The Secret Agent" (1907), and the short story "Heart of Darkness" (1902). Typical for his works is deep pessimism: he writes stories of men in extreme situations as in "Heart of Darkness" about a man who finds himself drawn to a savage whom he only should despise.

The award-winning film, "Apocalypse Now", directed by Francis Ford Coppola was loosely based on "The Heart of Darkness", but substitutes American soldiers in Vietnam in place of Conrad's subject matter.

CURIE, MARIE Sklodowska (1867-1934) — Chemist and physicist. Along with her husband, Pierre Curie, she is known for her work on radioactivity and on radium. Marie Curie's interest in science was stimulated by her father, a professor of physics in Warsaw. Madam Curie studied and was to later teach at the Sorbonne in Paris, France.

In 1898 the Curies discovered both radium and polonium (named for Marie's homeland). For their work in radioactivity, the Curies shared the 1903 Nobel Prize in physics.

By 1914, Curie was the head of two laboratories, one in her native Warsaw and one at the Sorbonne, known as the Radium Institute. Unable to continue her experiments after the outbreak of World War I, she received approval to operate X-ray machines on the battlefield so the wounded could receive immediate treatment.



Within two years she had established two hundred permanent X-ray units throughout France and Belgium. After the war ended, Curie raised funds for a hospital and laboratory devoted to radiology, the branch of medicine that uses X rays and radium to diagnose and treat disease.

Madam Curie died on July 4, 1934, from the cumulative effects of radiation exposure. In 1995 Madame Curie and Pierre's remains were enshrined in the Pantheon in Paris, France.

ARTHUR RUBINSTEIN (1887–1983) “I have found that if you love life, life will love you back.” Born in Lodz, Poland, Arthur Rubinstein became one of the great pianists of the twentieth century. At age 3, Rubinstein began to study piano, and within five years he had given his first public performance.

Rubinstein studied in Warsaw and Berlin, making his debut in 1900 with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. He first played in the United States in Carnegie Hall in 1906, and later achieved great acclaim there in 1937, especially for his superb lyric interpretations of Chopin’s music and his ardent championship of Spanish works.

The growing threat of Nazi occupation necessitated Rubinstein’s relocation to America, where he found a home in Los Angeles among a number of other European refugees. Although he became a citizen in 1946, he lived most of his later life in Europe. After the war and the loss of his entire family in Lodz, he dedicated himself to performing publicly in support of the new state of Israel.

Rubenstein continued to actively perform until age 90 and his popularity spanned generations. Rubenstein once said, “On stage, I will take a chance. There has to be an element of daring in great music-making. These younger ones, they are too cautious. They take the music out of their pockets instead of their hearts.”

Even after going blind, he traveled the world lecturing and teaching. He died in Geneva, Switzerland in 1982, and his ashes were buried in an Israeli forest named after him.



SIR JOSEPH ROTBLAT (1908-) Sir Joseph Rotblat was born into a Jewish family in Warsaw in 1908. In 1939 he accepted an invitation from James Chadwick to work at the University of Liverpool. After the outbreak of WWII, despite many attempts, Rotblat was unsuccessful in his efforts to bring his wife to England. She was among the many Poles who lost their lives during the German occupation. It was the invasion of Poland that made Joseph Rotblat first think about developing an atomic bomb. He now realised the extent of Germany’s military strength and brutality. He was afraid that the handful of physicists who had stayed in Germany might already be developing such a bomb, which Hitler would then use to force Nazism on the world. ‘It was a terrible time for me, perhaps the worst dilemma a scientist could experience. Working on a weapon of mass destruction was against all my ideas - all my ideas of what science should do - but those ideas were in danger of being eradicated if

Hitler acquired the bomb.’

During the war, Rotblat was recruited to work in the Manhattan Project. But As soon as Joseph Rotblat heard confirmation, supplied by scientific intelligence reports towards the end of 1944, that the German scientists had abandoned their atomic bomb programme, he left the Manhattan Project and returned to Britain. Some time later he along with Albert Einstein and Bertand Russell signed the anti-nuclear



Manifest. In 1958, Rotblat co-founded the UK Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Later, he applied his knowledge of nuclear physics to work in medicine and was Chief Physicist at St Bartholomew's Hospital for 30 years. Much of his work on world peace has been on a diplomatic level and is closely associated with the Pugwash Conferences, with which he shares the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to eliminate nuclear arms.

Quotes from Joseph Rotblat: “

All of us who want to preserve the human race owe an allegiance to humanity; and it's particularly the job of scientists, because most of the dangers to the world result from the work of scientists.”

“We are gradually realising the futility of war ... Now we must begin to think about security in global, rather than national, terms. We must get used to the idea that we are members of a world community ... We have to develop in each of us a sense of loyalty to humankind that will be an extension of our present loyalties to family, city, nation.”

POPE JOHN PAUL II (1920-2005) — Born Karol Joseph Wojtyla in Wadowice, Poland on May 18, 1920. In 1978 at the age of 58 he was elected to lead the Roman Catholic Church. John Paul II was the first non-Italian chosen as Pope in 456 years, the youngest in this century, and the most traveled and broadcast in history. Many believe his support of the trade union, Solidarity, in his native Poland, was a precipitating event in the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

In 1994, John Paul oversaw the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel, ending

a tense standoff that had existed since 1948. After that time, the Pope asked for forgiveness from the Jewish People for their suffering at the hands of Christians over the centuries.

In a historic visit to Israel in 2000, the Pope visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem where he placed a note in one of its crevices stating: “We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the People of the Covenant.”

Though Pope John Paul II was the most pro-Jewish Pope to date, some Jewish quarters have criticized the Pope for not apologizing for the role of the Church in condoning anti-Semitism, and for his support of the canonization of Pope Pius XII as a saint, despite his controversial record toward Jews during the Holocaust. On social questions, John Paul II was a conservative pope who was firmly against abortion, use of contraceptives, divorce, political office holding by nuns and priests, and ordination of women to the priesthood. However, he also championed democracy and economic justice for the developing nations of the world.



The Real Hero in Reconciling Christians and Jews

By David Rosen

Ha'aretz

Forty years ago, during the papacy of Pope John XXIII, the Catholic Church determined that the attempt to present the Jewish people as rejected by God was false, and cleared the Jews of responsibility for the death of Jesus.

But it was Pope John Paul II who was the true hero of Christian-Jewish reconciliation. The late pontiff called for "a new and profound understanding between the Church and Judaism everywhere, in every country, for the benefit of all." He stated unequivocally that the idea that the Church has replaced the Jewish people in a covenant with God was wrong, and even questioned the attempt to proselytize among Jews.

The two most significant events in terms of Christian-Jewish reconciliation were his visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1986 and his visit to Israel in 2000. The scene of John Paul embracing the chief rabbi of Rome, Elio Toaff, reached millions of believers who did not choose to or who could not read his writings. He described the visit to the synagogue as the most important event of that year, one that would be remembered for "hundreds of thousands of years" and gave "thanks and praise to Providence" for the occasion.

Full diplomatic relations were inaugurated between the Vatican and Israel in 1993, and then the Pope made an official visit to Israel in 2000, in a clear rejection of the traditional position of the Church that the Jews had been exiled from their land because of their refusal to accept Jesus and were condemned to wander. The visit had a powerful effect, primarily on the Jews of Israel. Most of them, especially traditional and Orthodox Jews, had never met a modern Christian. The common image of Christianity among them was negative, drawn from a tragic past.

The Pope's visit to Israel opened the eyes of Israelis to a new reality. Not only was the Church no longer an enemy, its head was a true friend! To see the Pope at Yad Vashem, demonstrating solidarity, weeping at the suffering of the Jewish people, to learn that he had helped save Jews during the Holocaust and that subsequently, as a priest, he had returned Jewish children adopted by Christians to their Jewish families, to see the head of the Catholic Church placing a prayer of atonement for the sins of Christians against Jews between the stones of the Western Wall - all of these scenes had a profound effect on many Israelis.

The widespread publicity given the Pope's visit to Israel had no less an important effect, and perhaps a more important one, on Christians, particularly on Catholics, in their relation to Jews, Judaism and Israel.

... The contribution of Pope John Paul II to the new spirit in Vatican-Jewish relations was unprecedented. In a speech to the American-Jewish Committee in 1985, John Paul said, "I am convinced ... that the relationships between Jews and Christians have radically improved in these years. Where there was ignorance and therefore prejudice and stereotypes, there is now growing mutual knowledge, appreciation and respect. There is, above all, love between us; that kind of love, I mean, which is for both of us a fundamental injunction of our religious traditions ... Love involves understanding. It also involves frankness and the freedom to disagree in a brotherly way where there are reasons for it."

PM Sharon pays tribute to pope as 'friend' of the Jews

By Haaretz Staff and The Associated Press

Pope John Paul II was "a man of peace, a friend of the Jewish people," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said at the opening of the weekly cabinet meeting Sunday, as he offered the country's condolences on the pope's death to the Christian community both in Israel and abroad.

John Paul "acknowledged its [the Jewish people's] uniqueness and toiled for an historic reconciliation of the nations and the renewal of diplomatic ties between Israel and the Vatican in 1993," continued Sharon, who met the pope in 1999, when he was foreign minister, and invited him to Israel for the millennium celebrations on behalf of the government. "The world lost yesterday one of the most important leaders of our times, whose contribution to bringing people together, uniting nations, and to understanding and tolerance will accompany us for many years."

President Moshe Katsav offered a similar tribute, saying: "The pope ... bravely put an end to historic injustice by officially rejecting prejudice and accusations against Jews."

Over the course of his papacy, John Paul II revolutionized the Vatican's relationship with both Israel and the Jewish people. In 1979, on his first journey home to Poland as head of the Catholic Church, he became the first pope ever to visit a Nazi death camp, kneeling in prayer at Auschwitz - a place he described as a "triumph of evil." In 1986, in Rome, he became the first pope to enter a synagogue; during that visit, he made his now-famous statement that the Jews are Christians' "elder brothers" and spoke of Christian responsibility for crimes against the Jews.

In 1993, the Vatican finally recognized Israel, a step widely regarded as removing any theological opposition to the Jewish state's existence. And in 2000, John Paul II not only visited Israel, but won Israelis' hearts by visiting sites such as the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and the Western Wall, where he observed the ancient Jewish custom of placing a note in the cracks between the stones. "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer and, asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant," the note read.

But while many Israelis mourned the loss of a uniquely friendly pontiff, for some, the mourning was more personal: Elderly Holocaust survivors reminisced Sunday about growing up with Karol Wojtyla, the man who became John Paul II, in the small Polish town of Wadowice, and about encounters with the young seminary student toward the end of World War II. These early friendships are widely believed to have been a major factor in the late pope's efforts at reconciliation with the Jewish people and the Jewish state.

One survivor, Idit Tziner, said that she was an emaciated 13-year-old in 1945. She had just been released from a Nazi labor camp and was sitting on a street corner in the snow, too weak to walk, when Wojtyla approached.

“Suddenly, he appeared, like an angel from heaven, when nobody else was taking any notice of me,” she said on Israel TV. “He brought me a cup of hot tea and two huge slices of bread and cheese ... After a while he asked me if I wanted to get away from that place and I told him I wanted to get to Krakow, but I couldn’t walk. So he hoisted me on his back, like a sack of flour, and carried me, four or five kilometers.”

Former chief rabbi Israel Meir Lau, also a Holocaust survivor, recalled that he met the pope five times. At one meeting, the aging pontiff told Lau that he remembered the rabbi’s grandfather going to synagogue every Saturday with masses of grandchildren around him.

“He asked me: ‘How many survived the Holocaust?’” Lau told Israel Radio. “Just five, 42 were killed. And then he [the pope] looked at the ceiling and said: ‘In all my travels - I visited 120 countries I see anti-Semitism and I emphasize our obligation, the obligation of all humanity, to ensure the continued existence and the future of our elder brother, the Jewish nation.’”

(Jewish relations with John Paul II were not friction-free: There were disputes, for instance, over the canonization of Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Christianity who became a nun and died in Auschwitz, and over the beatification of Pope Pius XII, who many Jews accuse of failing to speak out during the Holocaust.)

LECH WALESA (1943-) — Born in Popowo, Poland. An electrician at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk, Walesa became one of the founding members and leader of the Solidarity free trade union movement.

Solidarity emerged to challenge the communist government of Poland. Walesa led a series of strikes in 1970 and 1976, and in August of 1980 he successfully challenged the government to improve working conditions and to grant political concessions.

In 1983 Walesa was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace and in 1990 he was elected president of the Republic of Poland. However, Walesa’s skills as a union leader, which relied on his blunt speech and confrontational style, did not serve him as well in his political life. In the 1995 election he was defeated by the former communist Aleksander Kwasniewski, head of the Democratic Left Alliance.

