

Musical METAMORPHOSES – home mini concerts with a pinch of history – episode 3.

Welcome to the third episode of the podcast "Musical Metamorphoses – Mini Home Concerts with a Pinch of History." My name is Aleksandra Bobrowska, I'm a pianist, and I invite you to my virtual music salon, where today we host a truly unique and extraordinary figure, though also profoundly tragic in her fate. You will also witness the world premiere of two of the three pieces presented today, as the recording I make on set today will be the first performance of these works ever available online. So let's begin our next journey!

As a rule, I reserve great words only for special occasions, because overused they lose their meaning. Today is the moment to use one of them, because the person I'm presenting was not only an outstanding musician, but also a true hero. I'm talking about Zygmunt Szatkowski. I'm sure many of you haven't yet had the opportunity to meet this composer and pianist, so I'll allow myself to summarize his biography, which, like the fate of many artists living in the 20th century, was marked by the immense suffering of war.

Zygmunt Szatkowski was born in Bydgoszcz in 1914. His father, Jan, was a musician, but unfortunately, he died as a soldier fighting in the trenches of France during World War I, leaving Zygmunt in the care of his mother, who remarried shortly thereafter. From an early age, like his father, Zygmunt displayed musical talent, which led him to a musical education. He studied violin and piano, and in 1939 passed an exam qualifying him to teach music and singing in secondary schools. However, war clouds gathered over Europe, and Zygmunt was forced to interrupt his studies in favor of military training. In August 1939, he was mobilized to Brest-Litovsk on the Bug River, near the Polish-Ukrainian border. When German troops invaded Poland a month later, he fought there for four days against Nazi forces before being captured. Not long after, Zygmunt managed to escape captivity and return to Bydgoszcz, but soon had to report to the occupation authorities for food and shelter. This also meant that, like most Poles, he was forced to work assigned by the Germans. Although he had no technical or craft experience, he was hired as an engineer for the German construction company Holzman AG. Already in late 1939, at the request of his superiors from the reserve, he joined the underground organization ZWZ (Union of Armed Battle), and soon after, the Home Army. His legal employment allowed him to travel freely, allowing him to establish resistance groups not only in Bydgoszcz but also in numerous locations around Gdańsk. He organized hideouts in the Tuchola Forest and designated locations for weapons and equipment drops. Despite forced labor for the Germans and his underground activities, Zygmunt Szatkowski found time for music. He regularly played the piano for his family, and with several friends, sang and played Polish melodies in local churches – even though this was strictly forbidden by the Germans. When the Home Army commander in Bydgoszcz was arrested in June 1942, Zygmunt was appointed his successor. Already in 1943, he was awarded the Cross of Freedom with Swords by the Home Army for his services in the underground resistance. In March 1944, he was accidentally arrested by the Gestapo, which discovered his connections with the Home Army – fortunately, his commanding position was never established. "Thunder" – his underground codename – was held

for six months in his native Bydgoszcz and repeatedly tortured by the Gestapo, but he betrayed nothing. In September, together with his stepfather, also involved in the resistance movement, he was sent to the Stutthof concentration camp.

In Stutthof, Zygmunt Szatkowski also composed, but without writing tools, he had to memorize melodies, which he wrote down only after the war. He wrote, among other things, a Christmas carol, which he illegally performed with an eight-person choir on Christmas Eve, organizing a midnight mass. In April 1945, the SS evacuated the camp, and the prisoners were sent on a march toward the Baltic coast; Zygmunt's stepfather died during the march. Upon reaching the coast, still sick and weak, Zygmunt, along with several thousand other prisoners, was loaded onto empty, open coal barges, which the SS intended to tow westward. On May 5, 1945 – the day Denmark was liberated – the barge with Zygmunt aboard ran aground in the harbor of Klintholm on the island of Møn. The severely exhausted prisoners were cared for in the following days by the local population and the Red Cross. Most of the prisoners were later repatriated to Poland, which was then under Soviet occupation, but a few remained in Denmark – including Zygmunt, who spent several months in Danish sanatoriums for tuberculosis patients. In Denmark, he began touring as a pianist, performing works by Chopin and his own compositions. During a concert in Aalborg in late 1946, he suddenly collapsed and stopped playing mid-performance of a piano piece he had composed in Stutthof and only written down in late 1945. Zygmunt had to interrupt the concert and leave the hall. He never returned to the stage, as the event was followed by a period of severe depression influenced by the traumas of the war – Zygmunt was forced to abandon his musical career and during this time destroyed all his sheet music and scores. In 1947, he began working as a self-taught ship engineer. He quickly resumed his social activities, organizing courses for Polish refugees, founding an association of former Stutthof prisoners, and establishing the Polish Refugee Association in Denmark. However, he never returned to performing. He started a family in Denmark and had a son, Janek, likely named after his father. Zygmunt Szatkowski retired in 1981 and died on April 17, 1997.

However, Zygmunt Szatkowski's tragic and difficult fate also holds many glimmers of light and hope. One of these was in 1951, when Zygmunt's previously mentioned son, Janek, was born. Only then did he return to composing, writing a beautiful lullaby and a waltz for his son. The sheet music for these compositions remains in Janek's possession to this day, and he now lives near Aarhus, Denmark. Thanks to his kindness, I can perform the aforementioned pieces for you today and share the story of his heroic father. Jørgen Pedersen, a Danish lawyer and Renaissance man, also played a crucial role in the creation of this material. His curiosity about the world and his work on behalf of both the local and international community is changing the world into a better place. It was Jørgen who told me Zygmunt's story and helped me acquire the manuscripts of his surviving works.

In a moment, you will hear both of Zygmunt Szatkowski's works – "Lullaby" and "Waltz." I will also precede them with a piece by Fryderyk Chopin – "Waltz in A minor, Op. posthumous," as Zygmunt often performed his

compositions alongside Fryderyk Chopin's works in concert. Before that, however, I cannot help but gratefully acknowledge that this series of episodes of "Musical Metamorphoses" is made possible thanks to the support of a grant from the National Reconstruction Plan for Culture, which was financed by the European Union. This is a double joy for me, because today's episode clearly demonstrates, like no other before, the importance and value of a united and cooperative Europe. I am all the more delighted to be able to use this opportunity, even if only for a moment, to recall a fragment of Zygmunt Szatkowski's great talent and heroic life, specifically in the context of the European Union's artistic endeavors.