

The Winding Paths of Chopin's Biographers

by Piotr Mysłakowski

Fryderyk Chopin, Poland's greatest national treasure, enjoys an even greater celebrity than Pope John Paul II and President Lech Walesa - his fellow Poles. He has been the subject of more than 12,000 books and the topic of countless articles, in both the professional and popular press. Most of this literature focuses on his compositions and his pianistic virtuosity. Only a fraction deals with his life, his personality, and the socio-historical forces in play at the time. And hardly any of it is based on original source material. The vast majority of these publications borrow heavily from a small handful of biographies written just a few years after Chopin's death, in particular from books by such authors such as Frederick Niecks, Maurycy Karasowski, and Ferdynand Hoesick. The generation of biographers that followed, including Nowaczyński, Zamoyski, Wierzyński, Broszkiewicz, Iwaszkiewicz, only interpreted the findings of their predecessors without questioning the sources. Additionally, non-Polish speaking musicologists came to dominate today's discourse about the composer, but their superficial knowledge about the historical, social and cultural background of Chopin's early years simply adds to the problem.

Chopin's first biographies were based mainly on information obtained from his relatives and friends, and included material that today would be dismissed as gossip. This led to the creation of several "literary" biographies that were little better than novels, based as they were on fallacious material. These imaginary stories of Chopin's life were then accepted as historical truth, and their completely fictitious "facts" became firmly lodged within the official body of knowledge about the composer.

This rather confusing state of affairs led me and my fellow genealogist Andrzej Sikorski to

undertake new archival research. Conducted over a period of twenty years or so, our findings allowed us to correct and clarify several myths and half-truths circulating in the literature, especially with regards to Chopin's family and its origins. The discovery of several dozen previously unknown documents shed new light on the life of Chopin's grandparents, for example, and therefore on the childhood and youth of Chopin's mother Justyna as well. As we know, she had an enormous influence on his life.

Our book "Fryderyk Chopin: the Origins" (Warsaw, 2009) was the final result of these inquiries.¹ Interestingly, our research did not come to any final conclusions about some persistent biographical riddles - the most significant of which was the actual date of the composer's birth. This could well be described as the most absorbing puzzle to emerge from the story of his life. The issue is not really about convincing anybody of what the correct date is (the world is divided into the "believers in February 22" and the "believers in March 1"), but about some obvious contradictions in the original documents, which normally would provide us with final and unquestionable proof. What is really troubling is that these documents not only give us two different days as Chopin's birthday (March 1 and February 22), but also two different years - 1810 and 1809.

Each of these altogether four calendar combinations can be seen as fully justified! The Chopin University of Music in Warsaw chose February 22, while the Chopin Institute in Warsaw "believes in" March 1. The possibility of 1809 as the year of Chopin's birth, ignored by both institutions, was left to historians and scholars to debate in perpetuity. The reality is that one had to agree on something, especially since we were going to celebrate worldwide the bicentennial of Chopin's birth in 2010!

Where exactly is the problem? It appears that we have to resign ourselves to the fact that the final and definitive proof indicating the exact date of Chopin's birth simply does not exist, at least for now. What remains are only individual interpretations based on original documents.

The introduction of the Napoléonic Code in the Duchy of Warsaw in 1807 led to the establishment of a modern civil registry. Until that time, the only written records containing information about births were in church registries compiled by the clergy (parish priests, pastors, rabbis, etc.) These, however, dealt with the documentation of religious rituals, like the sacrament of baptism. The new civil registries were to contain only births, marriages, and deaths. The duty of the new-born child's father was to report the birth to the authorities within three days (this grace period was later extended to eight days). The official in charge of civic registries in each county was customarily the rector of the local parish, an area usually geographically identical with that of the county.

In contrast to today's practice, copies of birth or baptismal certificates were not given to the family. One could request a copy later when the need arose, such as for marriage or perhaps for certifying one's noble ancestry. This state of affairs was also the reason why Chopin's family (including Chopin himself) never actually saw Fryderyk's birth certificate. Therefore, one could say, they had no opportunity to suggest possible corrections.

The most widely accepted date of birth of the composer has always been March 1. This information takes us directly back to his first biographers (Józef Sikorski, Maurycy Karasowski, Oskar Kolberg etc.), who took the opportunity to talk to Chopin's mother and his sister, Izabella Barcińska. This date was also given by the composer

himself in his letter to the Polish Literary Society in Paris.² Furthermore, Chopin's correspondence indicates that all the people closest to him celebrated his birthday on March 1.

In 1893, Father Tomasz Bielawski, at that time rector of the Brochów parish church where Chopin was baptised, caused quite a sensation when he published in the press the ecclesiastical records pertaining to Chopin's baptism. The document was authenticated and the date of February 22 immediately began to circulate in academic circles. As a result, the information on the memorial plaque in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, where Chopin's heart is resting, was updated.

The matter is more complicated still, because the original date of March 1 was actually supposed to refer to the year 1809! This date was agreed upon by all of Chopin's early biographers. It was given by Chopin's confidant and editor Julian Fontana, and it was also shown on the memorial plaque at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw, the unveiling of which was attended by all Fryderyk's relatives. Only Chopin himself in Paris wrote in the above-quoted letter "born on the 1st of March 1810."

While there is no way in this short article to discuss the pros and cons of each of these possible dates³, it is worth taking a closer look at the two, luckily well-preserved documents concerning Fryderyk's birth: namely, his baptismal certificate and his birth certificate.

From the Latin baptismal certificate dated the 23rd of April, 1810 we can clearly conclude that on this very day the fulfilment of the ceremony of baptism took place, performed earlier "from water" (we do not know the date!). What this meant was that shortly after birth – and facing the possibility of a new-born's death – the infant was baptised "ex aqua", in a simplified way. This act could be performed at home by any Christian and no document had to be prepared. After the danger had passed, the godparents and guests were invited to the ceremony of "fulfilment" in church, which in

reality could in some cases take place even a few years after the child's birth.⁴ Chopin's godparents were Anna Skarbek and Franciszek Grembecki. The latter was most likely a substitute for Fryderyk Skarbek (Chopin's acknowledged godfather, after whom he is named), which is yet another argument for the actual birth taking place in 1809. Skarbek could only have been present at the baptism "from water" (at birth) in 1809, for one year later he was already a student in Paris.

The civil record of birth, prepared in Polish by a new priest, Father Jan Duchnowski, in 1810, states that "Before me there appeared Mikołaj Chopin, the father, forty years old, resident of the village Żelazowa Wola and showed us a male child, which was born in his house, on the twenty second day of the month of February, at 6 o'clock in the evening of the present year, [...] and that his wish is that the child be called with two names Frydrych Franciszek...". Therefore, "the present year" means 1810.

There have been several hypotheses attempting to clarify how the confusion regarding the actual day of birth could have arisen, including the absurd possibility that the father was so overwhelmed with joy at having a new-born son that at the time of reporting he was simply not quite sober! None of these hypotheses seem to be entirely satisfactory, even the one that states that such mistakes were very common at that time. Let us add, however, that Fryderyk Skarbek, Chopin's godfather, had exactly the same problem, which he wrote about in his Memoirs⁵: "On which day of February was I born into this world? This I really do not know with any certainty because my mother, who should know best, wrote it down for the 22nd of February [...], while the official note obtained from St. John's Church in Toruń makes me seven days older...".

If we are to believe Chopin's mother and his closest relatives we would still be left with the problem of the actual year of Chopin's birth. The initial answer here appears to be rather simple: Fryderyk himself wrote "1810" in the above-quoted letter to the

Literary Society in Paris. Let us ask then, how did Chopin actually arrive at this year?

The composer Franz Liszt provides us with an answer⁶. Chopin counted the year from a souvenir watch gifted to him by



Gold pocket watch (International Watch Company) presented to Frederic Chopin by Angelica Catalani, with her dedication, in January 1820.

the celebrated singer Angelica Catalani on the 3rd of January 1820.

On the watch, the singer engraved the following inscription: "...à Frédéric Chopin âgé de dix ans" ("to the 10 year old Fryderyk"). But Chopin could only be 10 years old in January 1820 if he were born in 1809. There are more examples like this.

On the dedication page of Chopin's juvenile Polonaise in B-flat major (composed and published in 1818) we read: "musicien âgé de huit ans" - "eight year old musician", while the review of this composition, printed in Pamiętnik Warszawski in January 1818 states clearly in Polish: "...the composer of this Polish dance, a youth who has just completed his eighth year...". If Chopin had just completed his eighth year in January 1818, then, the conclusion seems to be that he was born in 1809. Naturally, those musicologists who consider the year 1810 to



Title page of the first printed edition of the Polonoise g-moll, dedicated to Countess Victoria Skarbek. Ed. Izydor Józef Cybulski, Warsaw, November 1817

be correct? talk about "obvious mistakes" in both the dedication and the review – while agreeing at the same time that the composer's father himself took care of both the publication of Chopin's Polonoise and its review - an obvious paradox. How was it possible that Mikołaj Chopin would allow the publication of a wrong date (1809)?

Perhaps one day we will witness the discovery of a document indicating that Chopin's parents were not in Żelazowa Wola in 1810 at all! Or, maybe a memoir by an unknown guest of the Skarbek family at the time of Chopin's supposed birth will be unearthed. All that is left to us until that blessed moment arrives is conjecture, and in its midst, of course, Chopin's unparalleled, heavenly music.

(English Translation: Dr. Sławomir Dobrzański, Kansas State University)

¹ Reviewed in the last issue of "Polonoise" by Dr. Alan Walker.

² Letter dated "January 16, 1833." Correspondance de Frédéric Chopin, vol. 2, p.86. Edited, revised and annotated by Bronisław Edward Sydow, with Suzanne and Denise Chainaye. Paris, 1953-60.

³ For detailed discussion of the subject see P. Mysłakowski and A. Sikorski, Okoliczności urodzin Fryderyka Chopina. Co mówią źródła, Ruch Muzyczny nr 20/2002 pp. 28-34

⁴ Fryderyk's youngest sister, Emilia was also baptised "ex aqua" at home, and her fulfillment ceremony took place in church almost two-and-a-half years after her birth. In her case the exact date of the first ceremony was declared on the official certificate.

⁵ Pamiętniki Fryderyka hrabiego Skarbka, complete edition, p. 35, edited by P. Mysłakowski, Warsaw 2009.

⁶ F. Liszt, Chopin, p. 131, Paris 1852.

⁷ For example, Mieczysław Tomaszewski

About the Author



Piotr Mysłakowski (b. 1944), a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, is an award winning interior and graphic designer, publisher, genealogist and chopinologist. He was the Vice-President of the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI), an expert for the UNESCO, and the Vice-President of the Polish Heraldic Association. He is an Honorary Member of the Chopin Society of Canada.

Mr. Mysłakowski was a scientific consultant for the Chopin Institute in Warsaw and played a crucial role in creating the multi-media commentary in the Chopin Museum in Warsaw.

He is the author of groundbreaking books in the area of genealogy and biographical research. Together with his research partner, Prof. Andrzej Sikorski, Piotr Mysłakowski co-authored several books devoted to Chopin, such as *The Chopin's Warsaw* (2013) and *Fryderyk Chopin. The Origins* (2010), both available in English.