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## **Polish Culture in Los Angeles: History of Helena Modjeska Art & Culture Club**

### **Introduction**

In this article the history of The Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club is presented alongside its impact on Polish culture in Los Angeles and in Southern California. Specifically, we will provide a brief biography of the patron of the Club, Helena Modjeska (1840–1909) and a brief outline of Polish immigration to California during the second half of the 19th century, when poets, writers, actors and other professionals emigrated from Poland temporarily, or permanently. Then, we will focus on the Club founder and its first president, Leonidas Dudarew-Ossetyński, a prince, WWII veteran, actor, journalist, director and community activist (1910–1989). Finally, we list achievements of the Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club and its role in the life of Polish immigrants. It is remarkable to notice the Club is the oldest volunteer Polish organization in Los Angeles and it is celebrating its 50th anniversary in October 2021<sup>1</sup>.

### **Helena Modjeska and Immigration to California at the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Helena Modjeska (her name was changed from Modrzejewska to ease English pronunciation) arrived in California in 1876 at the time when many prominent Poles left the country, since Poland was divided between three foreign powers of Austria, Prussia and Russia and the country was no longer

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<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on materials from *Album 50-lecia Klubu Kultury im. Heleny Modrzejewskiej*, ed. M. Trochimczyk, E. Kański, E. Trybuś, Los Angeles 2021.

on the world maps<sup>2</sup>. Poles faced the dilemma what to do and how to defend and protect Polish language and culture during this time of repressions and prosecutions. Many were not able to continue their professions under foreign authorities, so they emigrated to England or France. Some went even farther, including the United States of America. In a group of Poles who arrived in Los Angeles in 1876 there was Helena Modjeska with her husband, a nobleman-journalist Karol Chłapowski (1841–1914), and son, Ralph Modjeski (1861–1940). We may ask: why Los Angeles? One of the historical sources states the following<sup>3</sup>. The legend of Los Angeles was developed and embellished by ingenious promoters of every variety, using flamboyant scenic guides, scientific health journals, travelogues, and other sober industrial prospectuses.”

Brochures made by the California government advertised healthy and dry California air, enormous possibilities of growing citrus trees and other agricultural crops, and most importantly, relatively inexpensive land and home ownership. Thousands of emigrants from Europe and America were attracted to Southern California by this marketing. While in 1870 the population of Los Angeles was 5,728 then 30 years later in 1900 the population grew to 102,479 people<sup>4</sup>. The main factors contributing to this extreme population growth were: the completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1885, the discovering of oil in Los Angeles and finally arrivals of early film producers. Thus, our Polish actress, Helena Modjeska, was probably also attracted by sunny weather, no severe and cold winters, and relatively inexpensive land and homeownership. All these were quite convincing incentives to take a long trip by boat either from England or from the New York<sup>5</sup>.

Before coming to California, Helena Modrzejewska performed in Polish theaters in the province of Galicia, because under Austria’s government there was more autonomy than in other parts of Poland, governed by Russia or Prussia. Her first permanent engagement was with the Lwów Theatre (1862–1863, also known as Lemberg, currently Lviv in Ukraine), where she played the title roles, like *Balladyna*, *Amelia* and *Maria Stuart* in Juliusz Słowacki’s plays. Then she moved to Kraków, the provincial capital, where

<sup>2</sup> This section is partly based on Maja Trochimczyk’s brief biography of Helena Modjeska in *Album 50-lecia Klubu Kultury*, ed. M. Trochimczyk, et al.

<sup>3</sup> J.W. Elias, *Los Angeles: Dream to Reality, 1885–1915*, Northridge 1983, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.laalmanac.com> [accessed 09/24/2021].

<sup>5</sup> B. Holmgren, *In Starring Madame Modjeska: On Tour in Poland and America*, Bloomington 2011. Beth Holmgren presents a different thesis, that Modjeska’s emigration to the U.S. was motivated by her wish to expand her international career as an actress. Prof. Holmgren believes that Modjeska purposefully selected the U.S. as the most promising location for theatrical success.

her first role was Sara in the drama *Salomon* by Waclaw Szymanowski. In the meantime, she trained herself in the main roles in Shakespeare's plays and in 1868 started acting in the Warsaw theatre, where she starred until 1876. As a patriot, she faced serious repressions from the Russian government to the extent that she was forbidden to play at all. As a result, in 1876, she came with her husband and son and a group of artist-friends to New York and then moved to California. They intended to form an utopian community in the new land of endless possibilities.

Despite all the marketing about life in California, it was hard to adapt to new culture and economic conditions. Modjeska and her husband bought 20 acres of land near Anaheim in 1878 and tried various agricultural projects, such as growing citrus trees and producing honey from their own bee hives. Alas, this was not enough to support the family and bring the expected income. Later, in 1888 they bought another property that Modjeska called "Arden" in Santiago Canyon, Orange County where they lived till 1906. Modjeska loved this place very much, she planted beautiful roses and hired and trained her gardener Theodor Payne (1893–1895) who designed not only her garden but later on also the botanical garden in Santa Ana and the Descanso Gardens<sup>6</sup>.

Once Modjeska learned English by attending private lessons in San Francisco, she decided to go back to acting and play in theaters. Her first role as Adrienne Lecouvreur in San Francisco theatre was a great success (1877). The American public adored her plays, her charisma, costumes and beautiful hats. Theaters were totally booked when she performed. By the year 1907, when she retired from the stage, she ceaselessly toured North America. Traveling by rail, she visited 225 cities and towns in the US and Canada. She even founded her own company and produced many plays by Shakespeare, including *Cleopatra* which was very expensive because of costumes and large number of actors participating in it. Out of the total 4,300 spectacles in which she performed, there were 2,250 plays by Shakespeare. She played Lady Macbeth 520 times<sup>7</sup>. She visited England in 1880, 1881, 1882 and 1885 and was very warmly received there, mainly for her roles of Camille and Adrienne in French melodramas.

Between 1879 and 1903 the actress visited Poland a few times, performing in Kraków, Lwów, Warszawa, Poznań, and other cities. Modjeska was also a founder of a special apprentice school for young girls in Zakopane,

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<sup>6</sup> For details see T. Payne, *Life on the Modjeska Ranch in the Gay 90s*, Los Angeles 1962.

<sup>7</sup> *Album 50-lecia Klubu Kultury*, ed. M. Trochimczyk, et al., p. 36.

where they learned how to make original lace products to earn money for themselves and for their families.

Modjeska was honored by poets who dedicated their poems to her acting and her beauty. Among them are Richard Watson Gilder and John Steve McGroarty. In the USA, she had a very close contacts with writer Henryk Sienkiewicz (who came with the group of utopian artists to California, but returned to Poland) and pianist-politician Ignacy Jan Paderewski who visited her and whom she introduced to prominent persons in the American society, at the beginning of his American career. Their contacts were long lasting and when Modjeska family sold Arden after 20 years of living there and moved to Newport Beach for retirement, Paderewski organized a special concert and donated all profits to Modjeska. She died in 1909 and was buried by her husband in Kraków, after being celebrated in a series of public commemorations, while her coffin travelled from California to New York. Her only son, Ralph Modjeski, was a prominent engineer well known for designing bridges in the USA.

### **Establishing Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club.**

Even though the immigration to the USA was limited after 1945 due to the regulations by 1924 Act, those who took active part in the American Army were granted immigration status. Some Poles were unable to return to their homes since those places were no longer in Poland. Based on decisions made at the Yalta conference by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in February 1945 and then ratified at the Potsdam conference of August 1945, Poland's borders were changed. A big part of Poland's land in the East was given to the Soviet Union, and Poland received the West part with the western border on the Odra river. Practically all Poles living in the East part, were deported to the cities in the West, like Wrocław, Poznań, or Szczecin – unless they declared the Soviet citizenships if they wanted to stay in their homes.

After WWII, Polish soldiers were spread throughout the Europe and other countries. Knowing that their families were killed and there was no place for them to go, they immigrated to the U.S. Among them were journalists, actors and musicians. Some were lucky to start new careers in Hollywood and in other businesses. There was a significant group of Poles with strong educational and professional backgrounds who realized that together they could do more to promote Polish culture in America, and in California in

particular. After a few informal meetings at private homes and at the Wilno restaurant in Los Angeles, an excellent idea was born to organize a formal association that would propagate and cultivate Polish culture. This was the beginning of the Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club, that was formally established in 1971. A talented actor, coach, theater director, and journalist Leonidas Dudarew-Ossetyński became its first President<sup>8</sup>. He was born in Wilno in 1910 as Leonidas Ossetyński, son of a prince, and after completing his education at the acting school, he performed in theaters in Wilno, Warsaw and Toruń using the pseudonym of Dudarew. During the WWII he served in the Polish Army in France and after this army was dissolved, he arrived in the U.S. in 1941. He started his theatrical career in America with a group of Polish actors in New York appearing as Adam in *Pastorale* by Schiller. He also performed in other Polish plays including *Warszawianka*, or *Policja* by Sławomir Mrożek. Simultaneously, he worked as a journalist for *Nowy świat*. In Los Angeles, Ossetyński first established his theater, called Helena Modjeska Players, and traveled with it to American and Canadian cities, while performing in English. Later he started his own theatre school, where actors like Marilyn Monroe, Clint Eastwood, Elizabeth Taylor, Anthony Quinn, and Gregory Peck received their training. He also played numerous roles in films, including *Gambling House*, *Affair in Trinidad*, *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, *Mission Impossible: The Heir Apparent*, and many more.

The Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club mission is the promotion of Polish culture abroad not only among Poles, but among American public as well. The most remarkable achievement of this Club in its first decade, was the organization of the monumental concert *Requiem* by Roman Maciejewski performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale in 1975. The organizing committee of this concert included Arthur Rubinstein and other notables; Rubinstein was also in attendance at the concert, which was very highly evaluated by the music critic of the *Los Angeles Times*. In 1978, Dudarew-Ossetyński resigned as the Modjeska Club president but was still active in promoting Polish culture. In 1983, he directed the Witkacy's play *Matka* with the Polish famous actress Barbara Kraftowna in the main role. This play received many 11 awards and fantastic reviews.

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<sup>8</sup> This biographical sketch is based on information from Maja Trochimczyk's chapter on Dudarew-Ossetyński in *Album 50-lecia Klubu Kultury*, ed. M. Trochimczyk, et al., op. cit. Press clippings, photos and documents for this original research were provided by the daughter of the actor, Valerie Dudarew-Ossetyńska Hunken.

## Helena Modjeska Culture Club Achievements During the Past 50 Years

Over the years, the Modjeska Club activities have concentrated on organizing hundreds of cultural events including public lectures and interviews with prominent and distinguished representatives of Polish culture, art and science. We already listed the American premiere of Roman Maciejewski's *Requiem* honoring the victims of war and repression that was held by the Master Chorale at the Los Angeles Music Center in 1975. As Maja Trochimczyk writes in the "Brief History" of the Modjeska Club, another significant event was concert by the Jacaranda New Music group in 2011 entitled *The Songs of Stones* and dedicated to the dramatic music of Henryk Mikołaj Górecki. During the 50 years of its history, the Club invited for performances and interviews such famous pianists, composers, and conductors as Krystian Zimmerman, Piotr Anderszewski, Marta Ptaszynska, Hanna Kulenty and Stanisław Skrowaczewski. Artist Stanisław Szukalski, the Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz, Professor Leszek Balcerowicz, Jan Karski, Andrzej Wajda (Oscar winner) and Irena Szewińska (Olympic medal winner) were among the most distinguished guests of the Modjeska Club.

During the Solidarity and the post-Solidarity period (1980–1989) the Club organized meetings with reporters and politicians. After the opening of the Polish consulate in Los Angeles, the Club received much wider access to the guests who visited the consulate. In addition, during the last 40 years, the Club developed a close cooperation with the Polish Music Center at the University of Southern California, and, in the past 20 years, also with the Annual Polish Film Festival in Los Angeles. Actors and movie directors participating in the festival were honored as guests and speakers at the Modjeska Club events. Among the most famous actors and directors we can mention: Jerzy Antczak and Jadwiga Barańska (they are now honorary Club members), Jan Englert, Krzysztof Zanussi, Agnieszka Holland, Magda Zawadzka, Daniel Olbrychski, Danuta Szaflarska and many more Polish actors and actresses. Music concerts with famous pianists, composers and singers were organized in concert halls, public libraries and universities and were open to the general public. In addition, the club co-sponsored several art exhibitions, such as a photograph exhibit of Pope John Paul II that was prepared by the Club in cooperation with the Polish school and church in Los Angeles.

Several projects were devoted to the promotion of the Club patron, Helena Modjeska. The list includes: the world premiere of a documentary film *Modjeska – Woman Triumphant* directed by Barbara Myszynska (2009),

or a play by Kazimierz Braun titled *Helena: Rzecz o Modrzejewskiej* presented by the Polish actress Maria Nowotarska from Toronto's Polish Theatre (1993). The most recent play titled *Helena* was written and performed in 2019 by Marta Ojrzyńska in Magicopolis Theatre in Santa Monica. In addition to Toronto Theatre, the Club hosted a few times the Fantazja Theatre from Sydney, Australia.

In 2010 in order to commemorate and honor the Club patron, just a year after her 100<sup>th</sup> death anniversary, the Club established the Annual Modjeska Prize. This award is given to actors with the most eminent contributions to Polish and Polish-American culture. So far, the award was granted to Jan Nowicki (2010), Anna Dymna and Marian Dziędziel (2011), Barbara Krafftówna (2012), Ryszard Bugajski (2013), Jadwiga Barańska (2018), Maria Nowotarska and Agata Pilitowska of Polish Theatre in Toronto (2019), and Andrzej Seweryn (2020). Two awards will be presented this year at the Anniversary Ball on October 10, 2021, to Jan Englert representing actors from Poland, and Beata Poźniak as a representatives of Poles who succeeded after emigrating to the U.S. The awards will be presented by another successful actor-émigré, Marek Probosz.

The Modjeska Club received many awards and honors for significant contributions to the promotion of Polish culture in California. The list includes; Medal "For the Meritorious Contribution to Polish Culture" from the Polish Minister of Culture (1997), Award for "The Promotion of Polish Culture Abroad" from the Union of Polish Stage Artists ZASP (2009), Commendation by the County of Los Angeles (2011/2012) and the Proclamation and Resolution of the City Council of Los Angeles and the Board of Supervisors of the County of Los Angeles (2011).

Individual Awards for the Club's Presidents and Board members in 2012 were given by the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Poland. A record number of 19 medals "for the promotion of Polish culture abroad" were presented in 2013 on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Modjeska Club. Earlier, in 1994, 1998, 2000 and 2003 seven Club presidents and activists received "The Cavalier Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland" and so did the founder of the Club, Leonidas Dudarew-Ossetyński, posthumously in 2013.

## Conclusion

Throughout its 50 years the Modjeska Club has organized nearly 500 events with thousands of Polish Americans in attendance, creating a larger sense of

community, further developing Polish culture and art, and continuing old traditions passed down by generations. During these 50 years we noticed significant changes in the Club leadership. At the beginning, in 1971 the board and the Club presidents were primarily composed of “culture-makers” such as actors (Stephanie Powers), artists (Stanislaw Szukalski), composers (Stefan Pasternacki), and the founder of the Polish school in Los Angeles Dr. Franciszka Tuszyńska. Then, consecutive immigrations provided new Club leaders and members, among them engineers, computer scientists and other professionals, including doctors, dentists, professors, real estate agents, and others. In 2018, Dr. Maja Trochimczyk became the Club president for the second time (first serving in 2010–2012). As an expert in musicology and also a very talented poet, she orients her leadership toward promotion of Polish culture among Polish immigrants as well as the general public of Southern California, in accordance with the Club’s stated mission. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of all in-person events by the state of California, the Modjeska Club shifted its activities to online format, using Zoom for monthly lectures and interviews.

It is worth noting that cultural organizations abroad are very welcomed, especially by newly arrived immigrants, who miss not only their homes and families, but also their culture, language and friends. They desire to establish new contacts and friendships. In Los Angeles, the second largest city in America with more than 10 million residents, promoting Polish culture and sharing it with other ethnic groups is crucial. We are proud of our culture and its achievements and we need to demonstrate it in our communities by presenting our music, movies, theaters, art and science. The existence of the Helena Modjeska Club allows club members to meet in person other professionals and expand their social networks. Another vital advantage of the Club membership is the participation in discussions with distinguished guests and having a direct contact with them. Poles in Poland do not typically have opportunities to face-to-face conversations with the luminaries of Polish culture, such as the members of the Modjeska Club have had. In 2021, there are more Polish America organizations with similar goals, such as the Paderewski Music Society which organizes Paderewski concerts and competitions, but the Helena Modjeska Art and Culture Club is the oldest one. It is also very energetic, with fascinating programs and speakers, continuing to promote Polish culture in California as well as to connect and educate Polish immigrants. Let us hope that the Club will have many more successful years.