

# **The boy from a closet and Yorick' skull.**

## **How Robert Andrzej Krauthammer became Andrzej Czajkowski**

**Piano music aficionados know him as a brilliant musician performing repertoire ranging from Bach to contemporary composers. On top of that, he used to play from memory because he remembered songs after hearing or seeing them just once. Artists and music lovers recognise him as a fascinating and intriguing composer. For those interested in the Holocaust and Polish reportage, he is Hamlet from Hanna Krall's "Dowody na istnienie" (Proofs of Existence). "The Anne Frank of pianism" – this is how the musician was in turn introduced by his American agent. British and broader English-speaking audiences, as well as specialist Shakespeareans, associate him with... his skull. He donated it in his will to the Royal Shakespeare Company to play Yorick in the productions of "Hamlet".**

### **Andrzej Czajkowski as Hamlet**

Andrzej Czajkowski or André Tchaikovsky was born in Warsaw on 1 November 1935 as Robert Andrzej Krauthammer. During the war, his family was forced to live in the ghetto, but the boy hid with his grandmother outside the walled district. Andrzej Czajkowski was the name from false documents they used at the time.

After World War II, in 1955, he participated in the 5th International Chopin Piano Competition, he won the 8th place and a "Calisia" piano as a special prize for the youngest Polish winner. He settled permanently abroad from the mid-1950s and had much success as a virtuoso pianist, but he dreamed of having more time to compose.

He died of cancer at a young age on 26 June 1982. In accordance with his last will, his body was donated for medical research and his skull was handed over to the theater prop warehouse. After more than a quarter of a century, in 2008, one director decided to fulfil Tchaikovsky's last wish. However, when the story of the prop leaked to the press, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) decided to withdraw it from the show. Andrzej Czajkowski's skull also makes appearances in philatelic classics. In 2011, the British post office has released a series of stamps commemorating the RSC's most notable performances, including David Tennant as "Hamlet" in the scene with the skull of Yorick.

In a collection of reportages published in 1995, Hanna Krall describes the composer through the prism of his relationships with other people, overlaid with traumatic Holocaust-related experiences and manifestations of the survivor syndrome. She sees him as Hamlet: a neurotic and traumatised child who has not come to terms with his mother's departure, her decision to remain in the ghetto with her new life partner when the family made efforts to hide beyond the wall, and finally with her demise, probably in the Treblinka death camp. Thus, he fits clearly defined roles, cultural and social clichés, like so many other people who came into direct contact with him or were captivated by his immense talent. What narrative did he choose for himself? To answer this question, it is worth to consider the circumstances in which Robert Andrzej Krauthammer became Andrzej Czajkowski. This can be done through studying his autobiographical notes.

## **A biography made up of moments**

Andrew Tchaikovsky wrote his autobiography as a form of therapy. He did not complete it and eventually abandoned the project altogether as can be seen in the artist's diaries from 1974-1982. Masterfully crafted in sophisticated English, these notes trace the composer's artistic, erotic and emotional life, as well as his impressive reading list. They also are the chronicle of struggles to arrange his own life into a narrative sequence. Eventually, the intended book was to become an "open text." Its basis was to describe the series of scenes and states of mind of a person who flirted with reality through deep introspection. Individual scenes were supposed to be months or years apart, and the reader was supposed to jump around in time without getting any logical or

chronological bridges. Consequently, everyone would have to co-create Czajkowski's autobiography with their own imagination by filling in the chronological lacunae intentionally scattered by the author.

This narration style can be associated with the “flashbacks of memory,” “snapshots,” and “momentary events” that Michał Głowiński wrote about in “Black Seasons” while searching for the right words to describe his own memories of World War II. In the end, their biographies were similar: Czajkowski (born in 1935) and Głowiński (born in 1934), were almost peers, both survived the war as children in hiding, and chose to write about their experiences as adults. Both were also homosexuals and were aware of the social constraints imposed on them by the matrix of heteronormativity prevailing in the society of the time. The composer wrote about openly it in his diaries, as that was yet another ghetto he had to live in.

## **Andrew Krauthamer enters the scene**

In his diaries and autobiography, Czajkowski expresses himself as an adult. However, in the collection of the Jewish Historical Institute, there is a preserved record of the future composer's wartime experiences written right after the end of the war. It is a retrospective story of a 12-year-old, recorded by a CKŻP worker and signed: Andrzej Krauthamer (spelling true to the original), which is his father's surname and the artist's middle name. During the war, the composer's grandmother, Celina Sandler, arranged for new documents under the names Czajkowski and Czajkowska, and the boy's names were reversed: the second name, Andrzej, became the first.

The literature concerning the musician often emphasises that he kept his assumed identity after the war, even though he hated the association with the Russian composer and did not appreciate his music. Moreover, the American agent forced the young pianist to use the French transcription of his stage name – something that he himself also did not accept.

The decision to abandon the family name may have been significantly influenced by the conflict with his father, Karl Krauthammer, who parted ways with the boy's mother and went to France, where he survived the war. Post-war family reunification was unsuccessful, and the composer

maintained that he had lost both parents, although his father was alive until 1983 (which is a year longer than the son). They finally reconciled in 1980, after a 32-year separation and lack of any contact.

An account kept at the Warsaw Jewish Historical Institute puts the choice of name and identity in yet another perspective. The record of war experiences dictated by Andrew is preceded by the “child profile.” Thanks to this, we can learn how the boy was perceived by Eugenia Silkes, a pre-war teacher who was associated with Centos during the war and ran a canteen for children at Nowolipki 35 St. Her opinion, therefore, can be considered an abbreviated interview of a vastly experienced child educator.

Eugenia Silkes wrote that he was a boy serious beyond his age. He knew many languages: Polish, English and French and used to read a lot. He spent most of his time with adults, which according to the educator had a bad influence on his personality. Further reading of the account reveals that the boy used to read voraciously and whenever he had an opportunity. Unlike little Głowiński, who fell into a stupor and did not read anything despite the possibility to use the library at the nuns', where he was hiding. Andrew's keen intellect, linguistic abilities and awakened cognitive curiosity must have been impressive. His maturity, however, was disturbing.

## **Robert Krauthammer watching the war**

Andrzej Krauthamer's actual account starts with the description of the bombing of Warsaw and chaos at home. The memory of the beginning of the war is confined within the grandmother's apartment at Przejazd 1 St. and limited to fellow residents: family and birds, one of which, a parrot, was killed by shrapnel. Andrew also recalls a panicking cousin who was afraid of a gas attack – perhaps he had already undergone the gas mask training described by other child diarists such as Renia Spiegel (18 June 1924 – 30 July 1942). Andrzej himself was almost 11 years younger than Renia – he was less than 4 years old when the war broke out. When reading his account, it is important to remember that much of the information he mentions is the knowledge that was passed on to him by someone else, probably his grandmother.

The next memory is of a stay in the countryside, when other children beat Andrew up for being Jewish – probably a record of the circumstances in which the boy became aware of his ethnicity, but bigger section in this flashback is about playing with friends: going down a well in a wicker basket and the subsequent infection caused by it. It is impossible to determine the exact time of this episode. Perhaps it was holiday or, more likely, an attempt to hide in the countryside at the beginning of the occupation.

A series of relocations follows – Andrzej’s mother, Felicja, and his stepfather try to find an apartment for themselves, but they end up living again at Przejazd 1 St., at his grandmother’s. It is difficult to systematise this period; it was probably a time of changes and narrowing the borders of the future Warsaw Ghetto. Eventually, Andrzej and his mother move in together at Tłomackie St. The future composer sees a scene of a Jew being beaten to death by a passerby and recalls that he and his grandmother both fell into a stupor. Around that time, grandfather dies and grandmother arranges for false documents. The energetic and feisty elder of the family decides to leave the ghetto.

Another episode is dated: already after the “establishment of the ghetto”, and another move to Przejazd 1 St. This time it is being a witness to yet another street murder – this time of a young boy trying to defend himself from the blows of a “German” (as dictated by Andrew). During this period, the future composer also lives with his stepfather, Albert Rozenbaum, who became a policeman in the ghetto. The boy takes note of his stepfather’s brutality toward other Jews and his mother’s dislike for this man. This sequence of memories ends with the date of 7 August 1942, when grandmother and grandson both leave the ghetto, even though the boy “doesn’t have good looks.” The mother and stepfather stay. Andrzej, like many other children, does not provide accurate information about how this risky operation was organised and performed. He is less than 7 years old at the time.

## **Andrzej enters the scene**

The next part of the account includes flashbacks from the hiding places. The chronology is marked by further relocations. At first, the boy settled in Chylice as Paris-born Andrzej Bonguard.

A complicated “foreign legend” was a necessity because of his Jewish appearance, but in recounting this episode Andrew makes it clear that at the time he did not know what it meant to be Jewish.

If one considers that the life of the future pianist and composer consisted of impersonating various roles and social clichés, then his conscious acting on the stage of occupation reality began at this point. The boy recalls learning a new identity and being “uncovered” for the first time by a hostile environment and moving to a new place. It was a train trip and a German passenger tried to treat Andrew to candy. External, anachronistic knowledge is introduced in this description of the reaction – the boy gave the passenger a vengeful look, as if he wanted to avenge his dead mother (it is unclear when she died exactly) as well as Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz, Pawiak and the entire Jewish Nation with his furious glare.

The first listed address in Warsaw was Złota 39 St. with the uncomfortable sofa on which he slept together with his grandmother. The horizon of the apartment story is initially narrowed down to the details of everyday existence (grandmother taking up most of the sofa due to her corpulence, the landlady stealing the child’s jacket, another “uncovering” and necessity to bribe a Polish policeman).

Nevertheless, the flashbacks are gradually becoming richer in detail and personal observation. The next hiding place was located at Świętojerska St., and while the details about the apartment are scarce, there is much more information about the people with whom Andrzej was hiding. Grandma lived elsewhere at the time and changed apartments frequently. The boy does not mention making any connections, only reading a book that he did not understand. Also in this apartment, he was uncovered yet again this time by a watchman and called a “hairy heeb”. This word is followed by a reflection expressed in a rhetorical question – is this how Poles call Jews, i.e. people like him?

Another hiding place was in Międzyzlesie (Andrzej provides the names of his hosts, and not the exact addresses), where the boy was locked alone in the basement. At that time, he underwent phalloplasty surgery to hide the marks of circumcision. The procedure was performed without

anesthesia, and the boy recalls that he couldn't scream, so he bit his lip, for which he was praised by the doctor. Between the three surgeries, there were other relocations. In the new place, in Kozłowice near Żyrardów, the boy felt like in paradise; he had the freedom to go outside, to go to the cinema, to play with children and to eat a lot. The family he stayed with was good to him and Andrzej returned the favour by teaching them to read. He had a Bible to read, and the Catholic religion piqued his interest.

When living in Kozłowice, he played games with other children, including little Volksdeutsche, who de facto discover his identity by demanding that he shows his penis while peeing together. Andrew is aware of the danger and manages to escape. Since hiding in Międzylesie, there is an increasing number of details about people hiding the boy – some of them are evil and mistreat the boy, and some other treat him well. These are undoubtedly Andrew's own memories and feelings.

## **The boy from a closet**

In the case of two other apartments in Warsaw, there are descriptions of domestic arguments and violence. Andrzej carefully writes down the accounts and emotions of the people he is watching; his horizon is not limited to his own experiences and problems (e.g. hair smothering, to which his grandmother regularly subjected him) and the confines of his hiding places, although there were many: a closet, dustbins or bedclothes, to name a few. Andrzej mentions his boredom while hiding in a closet without toys or books and plotting revenge on the Germans and the evil people who hurt him.

Before the Warsaw Uprising, the boy hid in two more places: in one there was an attempt of blackmail and to even bring in the Gestapo, and in the other, at Kaliska St., the boy managed to stay thanks to the selflessness of the landlady, a friend of grandmother Celina. This is where Warsaw Uprising found him. Andrzej recalls hiding in the bunker, being uncovered, and standing against the wall at gunpoint. He witnessed, but not eye-witnessed, the murder of a child who was thrown into a fire, and his mother threw herself into the flames as well. He admits he couldn't bear to look at it, but his grandmother told him all the details.

## Freedom of Andrzej Tchaikovsky

After the uprising, both the grandmother and the grandson found themselves in Pruszków: they wandered between the shelter of the Central Welfare Council and various acquaintances.

Andrzej recalls the filth, hunger, and sickness, as well as his grandmother's constant efforts to sell something in order to survive. The liberation followed, and the boy talks about the next episode: a poem he wrote for Polish soldiers and taped to their car. Then freedom began for him, but at the same time, his grandmother forbade him to talk about his Jewish roots.

In the final part of the account, Andrzej talks about his hatred for the Germans, and the nightmares and that he already learned how to be a child. That last role was probably not his forte. Eugenia Silkes, who was watching him, found "disingenuousness" in it, of which she wrote in the initial part of her evaluation stating that the boy was too serious for his age.

At the end of the story kept in the Jewish Historical Institute, there was a mention that the boy who uses the name Krauthamer is actually named Andrzej Czajkowski, because this is what his grandmother wants, and he is still too young and has to obey her. Therefore, he consciously stays in the role he used to play in hiding, although not by his choice.

## The skull of Yorick

Who was Yorick, the alter ego chosen by Czajkowski, at the end of his life? According to Hamlet, who finds the skull dug up from a grave in the cemetery, he was a jester, famous in his lifetime for his fantasy and comic invention. After death, however, his remains were disgusting. The Danish prince looks at the skull as if he was able to see his reflection in it, but throws it away with disgust, even though Yorick was his childhood friend and often played with him. Is donating a skull as a prop for a Shakespearean drama a posthumous joke by an eccentric artist or an invitation to have his life embedded in another cultural cliché?

Compiled from: H. Krall, *Dowody na istnienie* (online audiobook); A. Krauthamer, *Relacja*, Jewish Historical Institute 301/3617; *A musician divided: Andre Tchaikowsky in His Own Words*, ed. A. Belina – Johnson, Toccata Press 2013.

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