

FREDERIC CHOPIN
Son of Poland

Early Years

By
Opal Wheeler



Illustrated by Christine Price

 **Zeezok**TM
PUBLISHING
Elyria, OH

Frederic Chopin: Son of Poland, Early Years

Written by Opal Wheeler

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written by Opal Wheeler and illustrated by Christine Price.

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ISBN 978-1-933573-11-3

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Printed in the United States of America

Zeezok Publishing, LLC

PO Box 1960 • Elyria, OH 44036

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www.Zeezok.com

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MUSIC

Mazurka	93
Mazurka	98
Waltz.....	103
Mazurka	108
Prelude.....	117
Prelude.....	120
Theme	130
Grand Waltz.....	153

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CHAPTER ONE

A BLUSTERY WINTER'S night was sweeping an icy cloak toward the wide frozen plains of far away Poland, soon to wrap them in long chilling sleep.

Nowhere, in all that snowbound land, stretching far into the brooding dusk, was there even a breath of spring.

But long captive peasant folk in poorly built huts and cottages dotting the barren countryside, were already bravely dreaming of better days ahead.

“There’s food aplenty under those snow banks,” rumbled Farmer Pavel, peering through a frostbitten crack in his simple dwelling on the edge of the village of Zelazowa Wola. “A fine crop of winter wheat is sending up strong, green shoots this very minute. And no better soil to grow in, the world over.”

His neighbor helper sniffed the wintry air and pulled on stout leather boots.

“Better be showing soon, or there’ll be nary a bite for the master’s cattle and not a drop of milk for the young ones at the palace.”

“Patience, my good man — there’s an end to all winters,”

cautioned Pavel, chief caretaker of Count Skarbek, lord and ruler of peoples and lands for miles around.

Uneasily Pavel watched the last red sun rays light the village windows with tongues of fire. Soon now, with the lengthening shadows, stray wolves would be on the march, stalking unguarded farmyards for a nice fat goose or suckling pig for midnight feasting.

“Time to be finishing chores and locking barns,” he growled in deep bass voice.

Tying their heads in bright woolen scarves, the children scrambling to help, the hard working men strode into the gray twilight. Quietly they gazed toward the meadows where the fine palace of their master lay slumbering in soft white snow mantle.

“There’s news of a young one just arrived for the Count’s tutor,” announced Pavel, slapping his arms briskly to keep them warm. “Over yonder in the palace cottage.”

“For Schoolmaster Chopin! Tsch, tsch, tsch!” clucked his neighbor in surprise. “A bad time of year to keep new ones alive.”

It was true. In the low, three-room cottage, almost buried in whirling drifts, Nicolas Chopin bent anxiously over the rude cradle of his frail new son and drew it closer to the



blazing hearth to keep the baby from the icy breath of winter.

“See that no sparks come near the little brother, my good maiden,” he cautioned the three-year-old Louise at his side. “And take good care of the tiny creature while I am away.”

Pulling on his sheep-lined coat, he smiled down at the small nurse, so like a proud little mother with gay kerchief drawn snugly over her narrow shoulders as tenderly she rocked the cradle in the fire glow.

“I will sing him Polish songs,” she whispered, her dark eyes shining. “And Mother can listen, too.”

The gentle crooning, telling of the days when the people of the land were free, followed him as Nicolas went out into

the snowy February night.

Over at the palace, just a stone's throw away, he found the Countess Skarbek in her favorite satin chair, reading aloud to her children by the light of the glittering crystal chandelier.

“How now, my good Nicolas,” she queried. “What brings you out again on such a night as this? Surely the little one is safe?”

“Ah, yes, safe for the moment,” answered her slender, handsome tutor. “But his mother could not rest until I had come to ask a great favor. Justine and I would be pleased if you would grant us permission to name the child after your own son.”

Countess Skarbek tapped her richly slippers foot on the rug and sighed.

“Ah, my lovely Justine,” she murmured, “there is nothing that I would not do to gladden her heart. How I have missed her since you took her from my house to be your bride! No woman ever had a better lady-in-waiting than I.”

She paused a moment in thought.

“Yes, yes, the child,” she went on. “Frederic Chopin. A good name, Nicolas. And the christening?”

A shadow passed over the face of her tutor.