

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

<https://pw.ipn.gov.pl/pwe/history/behind-the-scenes-of-th/3210,Ignacy-Jan-Paderewski-and-Poznan-in-december-1918.html>
24.09.2026, 16:49

Ignacy Jan Paderewski and Poznań in december 1918

Marek Rezler

Select Pages

[Ignacy Jan Paderewski \(...\)](#)

[On Thursday 26 December 1918 \(...\)](#)

[It must be emphasised that contrary \(...\)](#)

[On 31 December 1918 \(...\)](#)

Ignacy Jan Paderewski, a great patriot and exquisite musician and pianist, visited Poznań as early as in 1890 to give a performance in the (now non-existent) Jean Lambert hall in Piekary, and two days later in the Polish Theatre. The next time that he came to Poznań was on 29 October 1901, when he played in the J. Lambert hall, and on 12 December of the same year - in the Polish Theatre.

The most famous visit paid by Ignacy Paderewski in Poznań was related to the events which

preceded the outbreak of the Greater Poland Uprising. In the political turmoil which was felt in the capital city of the reborn state, a commonly respected artist and patriot guaranteed the mitigation of emotions and was a person who stood above party ambitions and emotions. Most probably, it was the British minister of foreign affairs, Arthur Balfour who talked Paderewski into this trip during a conversation conducted in London in the middle of December 1918. In order to avoid travelling through the territory of Germany, initially, a trip by car through Austria and Czechoslovakia was considered, however, in the end, the British agreed to a sea trip to Gdańsk from whence the artist would go to Warsaw by train. However, before that, he held a meeting between 14-16 December 1918 with the Polish National Committee in Paris, where the artist's mission gained full support. On 22 December, Paderewski with his wife and Major Zygmunt Iwanowski of the Polish Army in France boarded the English HMS cruiser "Concord" in Harwich. Next day in Copenhagen, they were joined by officers of the British military mission: Colonel Harry Wade, Commander Henry B. Rawlings and Lieutenant Roy G. Langford and the future secretary of the artist Sylwin Strakacz. From the very beginning, the assumption was made that the artist would stop in Poznań during his trip to Warsaw, to discuss the current political situation and matters related to the circumstances of the incorporation of the territories of the Prussian partition into the reborn Republic of Poland after the signing of the peace treaty.

Paderewski arrived in Gdańsk in the morning on

25 December. There, he met representatives of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council: Wojciech Korfanty, Stefan Łaszewski and Józef Wybicki.

The news of Paderewski's pending arrival in Poland reached Poznań as early as 21 December via telegraph from Lausanne and was published in the "Kurier Poznański", electrifying the Polish independence circles in the city. When, several days later it became clear that the artist would drive through Poznań and stop in the capital city of Greater Poland, the above-mentioned circles signalled the necessity to defend the master from the unpredictable behaviour of the German population and their army. Troops of the People's Guard were brought into the city from the surrounding towns, and a general feverish excitement was felt. The Germans, seeing what was happening, tried to prevent Paderewski from leaving the train at any cost, then the political talks (as was often practiced at that time) would be conducted in a wagon, at the railway station. The artist himself, being completely unacquainted with the situation in Poznań, was festively welcomed by the local Polish people at the consecutive stations between Gdańsk and Poznań. In Rogoźno, at about 11:00, a German captain, Andersch, who represented the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, got on the train and communicated the demand to Paderewski to not stop in Poznań. This declaration was widely rejected. In this situation the Germans switched off the street lights in the city to hinder the demonstrations. As a result of this, for the following two days, Poznań was lit only from the

windows of houses and shop windows. However, the Poles who welcomed Paderewski had torches and various types of lanterns with them.

On Thursday 26 December 1918, at 9:10 p.m. the train with the artist and accompanying officers of the allied mission reached the emperor's railway station. The enthusiasm of the crowd gathered on Dworcowa Street reached its peak; even then, representatives of the German authorities tried, ineffectively, to prevent the artist from leaving the train. After official greetings in the building of the former emperor's railway station, the guests were brought in horse carriages to the building of the "Bazar" hotel, passing Dworcowa Street, Św. Marcin Street and Wilhelmowskie Avenue [Marcinkowskiego Street] through the enthusiastic crowds made up of the Polish inhabitants of the city. The new arrivals were escorted by the Honorary People's Guard and rank and file members of the People's Guard and Sokół organisation. As Paderewski arrived at his destination, he made a speech to the gathered crowd, from the windows over the entrance to the hotel and then a second one - in the hall, for journalists and official guests, which was published next day in the Polish-language Poznań press. He did not call for fighting, he tried to tone down the sentiments and expressed his joy about the independence regained by Poland. In the hall of the hotel, the artist was welcomed by the mayor of Poznań, Jarogniew Drwęski, and, on behalf of the Supreme People's Council - Bolesław Krysiwicz. The artist occupied an apartment in the corner of the hotel on the first (in fact second) floor of the hotel, from the side of Wilhelmowskie

Avenue and Nowa Street (Paderewskiego Street).

The position in which I. J. Paderewski found himself at that time was awkward. As a genuine patriot and a great promoter of Polish affairs coming via Warsaw, and above all as a representative of the Polish government (though at that time it was not confirmed that he would become the prime minister and minister of foreign affairs), he had to adapt to the rules applicable in diplomacy. Any violent events in Greater Poland, which could be associated with him, would incriminate the Warsaw authorities and would be treated at the peace conference as a *fait accompli* without consent from the allied Entente powers. The Polish cause at the conference (which, as a matter of fact was supported only by France) was losing more and more of its support and any complication of the situation in Greater Poland could make the situation even worse. In this situation, all the circumstances indicated that the artist had taken the diplomatic decision to fall ill. It is mentioned in the artist's memoirs that even during his trip on the English ship, I.J. Paderewski had caught a really bad cold, which made it easier to find an excuse which would satisfy questions raised about the artist's failure to appear in public in Poznań from the evening of 16 December 1918.

Paderewski consequently observed this decision at noon on 27 December, when the demonstration of several thousand school children (not only German ones) marched in front of the "Bazar" Hotel. The artist's spouse met the children, while he himself, still lying in bed, received only a small delegation which consisted of several people.

However, the illness did not prevent him from participating in political talks with representatives of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council and from preparations for a special banquet on the same day in the afternoon and evening.

On 27 December 1918, at 4:00 p.m., on the premises of the Poznań zoological garden on Zwierzyniecka Street, a rally of German nationalists began. They decided to organise a demonstrative march to the city centre whose aim was to neutralise the impression left after the demonstration of the Polish people in the evening on the previous day. This action was fully rational, considering that in Poznań, which at that time was inhabited by 165000 people, the Polish population represented only half of this figure while the remaining 50% were Germans and Jews who usually favoured them.

It must be emphasised that contrary to the popular concerns of Polish national circles, Paderewski was not exposed to any danger. The artist was well respected and his patriotic, but not inflammatory speeches were received with understanding. Among the German school children who participated in the march at noon on 27 December, curiosity prevailed, the same could be said of the Polish children - but there was a certain patriotic undertone to it. The German circles, on the other hand, reacted allergically to the presence of the English officers who accompanied the master, above all, to the Entente flags which appeared in the windows of houses in Poznań. The Germans had been accustomed to the Polish flags since the assembly of the

Partition Sejm of Poznań at the beginning of December. But American flags, and especially English and French ones were true “stumbling blocks” in a situation when just a couple of weeks before, Poles and Germans had fought side by side against the armies of the Entente states. The hanging of these flags was treated as evidence of disloyalty and treason.

Between 5:00 and 5:30 p.m. the German march reached the area of the “Bazar” Hotel and stood before a cordon formed by a Poznań People’s Guard unit. Then someone in the crowd fired a shot - it is not known who and at whom; with all the general tension this was the spark that led to an explosion. A general tumult and shooting began, and only after some time did it start to take an organised form which allowed the parties to the conflict to be distinguished. The artist and the persons who accompanied him, who were preparing for participation in the banquet organised in their honour, were moved to rooms located deeper inside the hotel, and not without reason, as later on, a number of holes from machine gun bullets were discovered in the windows of the apartment. However, no one was hurt. At about 6.00 p.m. Roder Blankertz - a representative of the Executive Division of the Worker and Soldier Council arrived at the hotel with a proposal for the Poles to lay down their weapons, and Commander Rawlings tried to conduct negotiations in the General Command of the V Corps on Solna Street with regards to possible protection for I. J. Paderewski and the representatives of the British mission; both actions ended in failure. At that time, the artist

remained on the sidelines.

From that moment on, I. J. Paderewski, carefully protected until his departure from Poznań, did not leave the hotel, but conducted talks with politicians from Poznań on the spot. Neither did he get involved in any activities of the Commissariat of the Supreme People's Council nor Central Command, which was fully compliant with the officially adopted neutral attitude in relation to the insurgent events. Scenes which can sometimes be found in quasi-documentary films, presenting the artist in the company of Polish soldiers and talking to Major Stanisław Taczak are just an invention of the author of the script.

On 31 December 1918, in the afternoon, I. J. Paderewski started preparations for his further trip to Warsaw. Then, soldiers from the Kórnik company who had arrived in Poznań a couple of days before wished to see the artist. The master thanked them in a speech which he made to them as they were gathered in the hotel yard. Then, he was quietly taken to the railway station in a car from which, at 2:00 a.m. he travelled to Ostrów Wlkp. And Kalisz by train - at that time, there was no direct railway connection between Poznań and Warsaw yet. If we should believe the artist himself, he was accompanied by a military escort consisting of Polish soldiers. From Kalisz, he sent a telegram to Poznań, expressing his thanks for the excellent reception, without even mentioning the outbreak of the Uprising. In a memoir published after some years, the artist described the events related to the Uprising in Poznań very generally and inaccurately, in a manner which

proved his poor orientation in the situation and his lack of involvement in insurgent matters - thus making the sincerity of his attitude during the period between 26-31 December in Poznań only more reliable.

In the capital city, I. J. Paderewski took the post of prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. He arrived in Poznań on 8 March 1919, to effectively champion the provision of help by Greater Poland to relieve Lviv which was being besieged by the Ukrainians. Several months later, on 27 December, being enthusiastically welcomed, he participated in the celebrations of the first anniversary of the outbreak of the Greater Poland Uprising. The welcome events, which had taken place one year before, were reconstructed and the artist again made a speech from the hotel's window. The photos taken on that day are even today often described as the arrival from 26 December 1918.

The master visited Poznań one last time between 22 and 29 November 1924. These were days which the city devoted, above all, to him. Held in high esteem, he resided in the "Bazar" Hotel, just like a couple of years before. On Saturday 22 November, he received the diploma of an Honorary Citizen of Poznań in the Town Hall. The next day, in the University Hall, he received an honorary doctorate from the Poznań University, and in the afternoon, a homage march in front of the hotel, from the window of which the artist made a speech, was organised. In the evening of the same day - 23 November 1924, a solemn performance of the opera entitled "Maria" by Henryk Opieński took place in the Opera House.

Next day, a concert of the music pieces composed by I.J. Paderewski was organised in the University Hall, with his special participation. The following days were also filled with events scheduled in the programme of the visit. On Wednesday 26 November, the artist visited pupils from a school which was named after him, first at the school itself and then in the afternoon in the building of the Polish Theatre. During leisure time the Paderewski family paid private visits to their friends from Poznań. Thus, the time was spent very intensively.

This was the last visit of Paderewski to Poznań. The artist, being in conflict with Józef Piłsudski, and after the latter's death, leading the opposition alliance called Front Morges, had neither the time nor the conditions to travel around Poland. But, he did not forget about Poznań. In 1931, he funded a monument of president Thomas W. Wilson for the city. Poznań, in turn, commemorated him in 1928 with a beautiful plaque on the building of the "Bazar" Hotel.

After World War II, on 24 November 1980, the Poznań Music Academy was named after Ignacy Jan Paderewski. On 3-4 July 1992, the coffin with I. J. Paderewski's remains was honoured in Poznań on its way to Warsaw; the route which the master covered in the evening on 26 December 1918 was reconstructed on 6 May 2015. On the initiative of the Hipolit Cegielski Society in Poznań, a monument of the artist, designed by Radosław Nowak, was unveiled at the new building of the Music Academy

Select Pages

1

2

3

4

