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ZOOM

in on america

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First Steps on the American Soil and Stage



Portrait of Helena Modzejevska by Tadeusz Ajdukiewicz, 1880
National Museum in Krakow

In this issue: Helena & Ralph Modjeski

Zoom in on America

From Modrzejewska to Modjeska

Helena Modrzejewska's first name is present in a number of different languages, or has related versions such as Elena or Lena, her surname "Modrzejewska", however, poses a real challenge to pronounce for any non-native speaker of the Polish language. It is no wonder then that when Modrzejewska, an already accomplished actress in Poland, wanted to pursue her acting career in America, her name became a concern. It was actor John McCullough of the California Theater who suggested simplifying it. In her *Memoirs and Impressions*, the actress describes the moment when she changed her name Modrzejewska to Modjeska:

After the rehearsal Mr. John McCullough came to speak to me. He was visibly touched and said many flattering things to me, and at once set the date of my debut for August 13 [1877]. Before leaving, he asked me how I spelled my name. I wrote it in full, just as it is spelled in Polish, "Helena Modrzejewska," and handed it to him. He looked at it, smiled, and rubbing his head, said: "Who on earth could read that, I wonder? I fear you will be compelled to change your name, Madam!" I told him I did not like to do so, but I might, by the omission of a few letters, make out a name which would sound pretty much like my own, and yet not frighten people away, and I wrote down "Modgeska." He smiled again, saying it might remind one of "Madagascar. I soon perceived the point, and changed

the "g" into a "j". He spelled aloud "Modjeska." "Now," he said, "it is quite easy to read, and sounds pretty, I think." We parted good friends, and I began to make preparations for the performance of "Adrienne Lecouvreur."

Modjeska had come to America the previous year (1876) with her second husband, Count Karol Bozenta Chlapowski, and her son, Ralph, from her first marriage, and a few friends, including writer Henryk Sienkiewicz (who later won the Noble Prize in Literature in 1905.) This was a politically driven immigration as the Chlapowskis' patriotic stand put them in trouble with the authorities in the Russian Partition.

While their ship neared the American shore, the actress had mixed impressions of her second homeland to be:

I have but an indistinct recollection of our landing in New York, but what I remember is the first picture of the city on our approach through the bay, a picture most enchanting, almost magic in its ethereal beauty. There were no shadows in it, no perspective, all was flooded with sunlight. The delicate, dim coloring gave to the whole a soft, lovely, unreal, and altogether most wonderful effect. Alas, as we came nearer, the beauty gradually vanished, and when we reached the docks the charm was totally dispelled.



This photo showing a general view of the Third Avenue Line El train tracks, looking north up the Bowery from Grand Street, in New York City was taken in 1891 (5 years after the Modjeskis came to the United States.) On the west side of the street the cable car tracks are being installed.

(AP Photo)

The first bad impressions of New York did not wane with time. In fact, they deepened in Modjeska's mind when, to the grim architecture, she added the habit New Yorkers had of keeping their feet up on windowsills. She wrote to Stanislaw Witkiewicz:

New York is a monstrous, untidy bazaar. The buildings are large, but without style. Brick or chocolate houses (the latter called here brownstone), with green window-shades, look simply awful. The whole city is as ugly as can be. But what makes the streets look still more unattractive are the soles of men's boots in the windows. Imagine that men have here the singular custom of sitting in rocking-chairs and putting their feet on the windowsills. You can see and admire the size of their shoes in the hotel lobbies, the barber shops, the clubs, and even in some private residences. Wherever you turn, these soles stare at you.

But there were also things about New York that she liked. In the same letter she writes:

In the evening we go to watch the ferries. They are large boats on the two rivers that encircle New York on both sides, and carry passengers to and from the different suburban towns. When all these boats are lit inside, they make a pretty sight. The colored lights placed in front of each ferry, reflected in the water, increase the effect, and - as there are many, many of those moving small palaces, going back and forth, the whole river looks as though it were on fire.

And so, even with a plan to go back to New York to "conquer" the metropolis one day, the family decides to travel by sea to California. "Our address will be: Anaheim, California, poste restante," she writes in a letter to her mother.

The party's arrival in San Francisco happened in bad weather, amidst the Bay's notorious fog:

For two days the steamer was prevented from landing because of the thickness of the fog. I remember standing on deck, wrapped up in a blanket, for the cold was quite penetrating, and straining my eyes in the direction of the Golden City. But there was nothing to be seen but the milky mist, and even when the fog became less thick, and at last we had entered the bay, we could distinguish only lights piercing through the veil of mist, and some nondescript forms that might be rocks or palaces, vague and mysterious.

Modjeska went to San Francisco to see Edwin Booth (1833 – 1893), one of the best Shakespearean actors of the 19th century America, who received special acclaim for his role of *Prince Hamlet*. She was not disappointed seeing him act, but the fragment below shows in a humorous way how she learnt about the differences between American and European audiences:

Imagine how indignant I grew when I heard men in the gallery whistling when he came before the curtain to take his call. I thought the people must be crazy, and turning to



Left: 1968 Helena Modrzejewska as Halszka and Antonina Hoffmann as Beata in "Halszka z Ostroga" by Jozef Szujski
Above: Edwin Booth, one of America's greatest stage actors of the 19th century. (AP Photo)

Captain Lessen, who sat next to me, I exclaimed: "What an outrage! To whistle at such an artist! I am sure I shall never play before such a stupid audience." Upon which my friend explained to me that whistling in this country did not mean an insult, as it does in Europe, where such a thing is worse than hissing; on the contrary, young men here whistle when they are pleased, to emphasize their approval. "They simply imitate birds," he added.

Even though she travelled with her husband and son (then 15 years old) and her friends, the beginnings were quite difficult. Unused to the weather and a completely new environment of their settlement in Anaheim, they soon felt homesick:

The blue waters of the great Pacific reminded me of our first sea-voyage when we left our country. The recollections of the happy past, spent among beloved people, Cracow, with its churches and monuments, the kind friends waiting for our return, the stage, and the dear public I left behind, all came back to my mind, and I felt a great acute pang of homesickness. I stepped away from the rest of the company, threw myself on the sand, and sobbed and sobbed, mingling my moans with those of the ocean, until, exhausted.

The party bought a farm and tried their hand at agriculture, yet without any economic success. With waning earnings

and no prospects at selling their dairy or vine, Modjeska made a decision:

My husband had already spent \$15,000, yet he was ready to sacrifice the last penny of his small remaining capital to keep up the colony. I could not allow that, and disclosed my plan of going to San Francisco in order to study English, and try to get on the stage.

Now, the priority became for Modjeska to learn good English that would enable her stage comeback. She was learning along with her son Rudolphe, whose name was also changed for a more American 'Ralph'. As can be guessed, he made a much faster progress in acquiring a new language.

He made such rapid progress that in March he wrote a farce in English, which was performed at Governor Salmon's house by the latter's sons and himself. We had met the governor during our first stay in San Francisco, and he took a great interest in my prospective debut.

Modjeska was determined to stay on in America and try to achieve success. When a friend urged her to return to Warsaw, she wrote back:

I left Poland as the leading lady of the Warsaw Theatre; I will return as an acknowledged star of foreign stages.



John Edward McCullough. Photo Library of Congress



Helena Modrzejewska as Adam Kazanowski in "Dwór królewicza Władysława" by Józef Szujski, Photo Polona

The debut proved a success and John McCulloch offered Modjeska a week of different performances:

He said there was quite a rush at the box-office to see the new Polish actress, and though next week belonged by right to Miss Rose Eytinge/ the latter kindly consented to postpone her engagement for a week. Her scenery was not quite ready, and so she preferred to wait, though she might easily have filled that week with other plays of her repertoire, I called on her and thanked her heartily for this concession. Mr. McCullough wanted me to play Juliet, alternating it with Adrienne, and he also asked me if I could play Ophelia to his Hamlet during one night of that following week, which he had selected for his benefit. I told him that I did not think I could learn the mad scene in English so as to be quite easy in it, at such short notice, but if he thought that the public would stand my rendering of this scene in Polish I might be ready to play the rest of the part in English. He consented, and rehearsals were called. John McCullough at that time was occasionally showing signs of the nervous disturbance which led him to that disastrous disease of which he died. While I was rehearsing with him the scenes of Hamlet, I noticed that several times

he wiped tears from his eyes. When I inquired what affected him this way, he answered, "It is your voice, Madame!"

Helena Modjeska made a profound first impression on the American audience which launched her career in the New World. In her *Memoirs* she remembers the first two weeks as a "whirlwind of excitement:"

People would flock to my dressing-room every evening, with tears in their eyes, shaking my hand, embracing me, and saying the most lovely things.

She achieved great success as an actress on the American stage. Theatrical agent Harry J. Sargent signed her for a tour on the east coast. It was during this tour that she made her New York debut. She was mostly known for her roles in Shakespeare's plays, but her appearance in Schiller's *Maria Stuart*, Gautier's *Camille* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House* were also highly praised. In 1883 she obtained American citizenship. Helena Modjeska died on April 8, 1909 in Newport Beach, California. She was buried in her hometown Krakow.



Aleksander Reguński 1839-1884 Pani Helena Modrzejewska. Photo Polonia

Ralph Modjeski

Ralph Modjeski, Helena Modjeska's son, was born Rudolphe Modrzejewski on January 27, 1861 in Krakow. As a young boy, he showed talent for music and curiosity for how things work. He spent his childhood in Poland and was often cared for by his grandmother as his mother was preoccupied with her career. He heard about the 1876 Exposition in Philadelphia and dreamed of seeing it. In her *Memoirs and Impressions*, Helena Modjeska remembers the time the family discussed this idea:

Then one morning during the Christmas holidays my son Rudolphe, whom I had sent to Cracow with my mother in order to place him in a Polish school, came to Warsaw to spend his short vacation with us. He was even then determined to become a civil engineer. The first thing he spoke of was the coming exposition in America; and the lad, looking at the maps, declared that some day he would build the Panama Canal. He said it would be so nice if we could go to America now, see the great fair, and then cross Panama to California. He looked so happy planning this journey, that both my husband and myself began to look upon the crossing of the ocean as a possibility.

When the family went to America in 1867, the boy's dreams came true:

Of course we went to Philadelphia several times to see the Exposition, and Rudolphe was happy, for he takes great interest in all sorts of engines, which are most magnificently represented there.



Ralph Modjeski (Rudolf Modrzejewski) in 1931
Source: Wikipedia

In 1877, a year on in his new country of residence he understood that he had to first master his English. It was also then that he changed his name for a more American version of Rudolphe.

My husband had remained six weeks with me this time, but he was obliged to return south. He left with me my son, Rudolphe, who became at once my fellow-student. He then changed, with our approval, his name to that of Ralph, because, he said, Americans do not like long foreign names. Besides, we thought the names were really one.

She also remembers how they both learned from a great friend and teacher, Jo:

My boy also was a diligent pupil, and we both began to learn English with an energy verging on frenzy. There was not an hour of time lost ; every minute was turned to profit. Of course he, being so much younger, learned much more quickly than I and could talk fluently long before I was able to put a few sentences together [...]

Even though Ralph did not build the Panama Canal, he grew to be one of the United States best bridge engineers. He was chief engineer for these bridges and more: Government Bridge (1896), Thebes Bridge (1905), McKinley Bridge (1910), Crooked River Railroad Bridge (1911), Broadway Bridge (Portland) (1913), Harahan Bridge (1916), Metropolis Bridge (1917), Mears Memorial Bridge (1923), Benjamin Franklin Bridge (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Camden, New Jersey) (1926), Tacony-Palmyra Bridge (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Palmyra, New Jersey) (1929), Huey P. Long Bridge (1935), and others. He was also Consulting Engineer for the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge (1936).



The San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge following the opening on December 11, 1936. (AP Photo)

ACTIVITY PAGE

January-February 2018
TRIVIA QUESTION

Which San Francisco bridge did Ralph Modjeski help to construct?

Send the answer
(with your home address) to:
KrakowAIRC@state.gov

The 3rd, 4th and 6th correct answer will be awarded with a book prize

Deadline: March 15, 2018

November-December 2017
Answer:

They were principles for peace negotiations and an end to WWI.

The winners are:
Dominika from Luzino,
Dominika from Pielgrzymowice, and Aleksander from Radom

CONGRATULATIONS!!!
The prize will be sent to you by mail.



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Exercise 1. Reading

Read the articles on pp.: 2-6 and decide whether the sentences below are true or false:

1. Actor John McCullough asked Helena Modrzejewska to simplify her surname to "Modgeska", but she didn't like his idea and chose "Modjeska".
2. It was Ralph Modjeski's dream to see the centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.
3. Modjeska's first impression of New York was an enchanting picture of a beautiful city.
4. Edwin Booth was one of the best Shakespearean actors of 19th century America.
5. Ralph Modjeski was Consulting Engineer for the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge.
6. The Modjeski family initially tried their hand at farming but they were not successful and that was why Helena Modjeska decided to return to her profession of an actress.
7. Henryk Sienkiewicz won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1905.
8. Although Helena Modjeska lived in the United States for decades, she was not an American citizen.
9. Before she learned that whistling in the theatre means applause rather than displeasure, she was appalled by this reaction of the audience.

Exercise 2. Speaking

Work in pairs.

Tell your partner about your language learning habits. Consider these questions:

Do you read literature in the language you are currently learning? How do you study grammar? Do you listen to songs in that language? How do you learn new words? How do you find out about cultural differences between countries that speak different languages?

Do you have any novel techniques of learning a new language?

Listen to your partner telling you about their methods. Do you think you could benefit from their experience?

Useful links:

1. MEMORIES AND IMPRESSIONS OF HELENA MODJESKA, 1910
<https://archive.org/details/memoriesandimpre017092mbp>
2. BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF RALPH MODJESKI 1861-1940 BY W. F. DURAND PRESENTED TO THE ACADEMY AT THE AUTUMN MEETING, 1944, NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS VOLUME XXIII TENTH MEMOIR:
<http://www.nasonline.org/publications/biographical-memoirs/memoir-pdfs/modjeski-ralph.pdf>



KŁOCH & DUTKIEWICZ

W WARSZAWIE