

Chopin's Music Box

It was the first morning of my holiday and I was staying at Schronisko na Przystopie near the river Vistula. After having a hearty breakfast and wearing my hiking clothing with eel pole, fishing gear and a day's provisions all packed away, I started my long hike from the schronisko down the shallow valley towards the river. With walking staff in hand and pack slung over my shoulder, I followed the winding hiking trail through the pines as I took in its fresh aroma and enjoyed the sights of wildflowers and the music of the local birds of the region. The hike proved to be most enjoyable when at last I cleared the woods and was now at my destination, the river Vistula.

I paused to not only gaze at this beautiful river, but to reflect on the history and folk lore that that was part of my childhood, my being and history as a Polska. But more importantly, the best spot for a most likely unproductive day of eel fishing, preferably in the shade of some trees. And to my luck, I did so. After unpacking my gear and baiting my hook, I swung the rod out and the line landed about five meters into the river. Then sitting back against the tree that was very near to the shore and with a sip from my flask, I settled down for a nice long day of fishing, dreaming and wishful thinking.

Not long after, I was joined by a fellow eel fisherman who took up a place not far from my left, we greeted and exchanged pleasantries.

"Hello!" I called out. "I'm Filip, here on holiday. Is this a good location?" I lightly raised my fishing pole.

"Aleksander! Good to meet you and I was about to ask you the same!" He settled in and appeared to be intending on spending the whole of the day here, judging by the looks of the gear he had with him.

We sat in silence and enjoyed the view of the Vistula as it flowed on by, when another rather gruff-looking fellow arrived and took up a seat not far from my right. He did not have the same amount of gear as either Aleksander or myself, just enough for a few hours of carp fishing by the looks of it.

"Hello friend!" I called out to our new companion. "I'm Filip, and over there is Aleksander!"

"That's nice," He said casting his line out, "and I am Jakub. So, now we are friends?" He placed his rod into a holder as he laid back and brought his hat over his face. "Ok, friends. Let me rest now."

I glanced back over to Aleksander who shrugged his shoulders, then went back to his eel fishing. The time passed slowly for us as our lines showed no signs of any takers. Then I felt a light nibble coming from mine, more like a series of quick light pecks with a pause, then the quick pecks again.

"I think someone's interested in my bait." I announced.

"Mine too!" Aleksander called out, but he was getting more of a steady single soft hit like the ticking of a clock.

"Probably carp," called out Jakub from under his hat, "they like to play with you and steal the bait!"

"They're doing the same to you as well, Jakub!" I called out. But they were pulling on his line differently as well, more of a gentle steady pull, tug, tug, pause that repeated a few times. Then all at once, our lines were still again.

"That was unusual!" said Aleksander.

"Yes, it was!" I responded as I checked my hook and flung the line just a few meters further back out. And as I leaned back against the tree, I noticed that my new friends moved closer to me and did the same with their lines as well. As we waited for a bite to happen, I watched some butterfly's pass over and admired the flapping of their wings; a series of quick flaps then a short pause that was mesmerizing yet up lifting to see. It took me a few moments before I realized that my line was repeating this same pattern again, only stronger than before.

"They're back!" Aleksander called out as his line did its steady tug, tug, tug.

Jakub was standing with reel in hand as he watched his rod again repeat its pull, tug, tug, pause pattern. Timing himself to set the hook and with a mighty pull, reeled in his still baited hook with no fish attached. He let out a colorful comment as he proceeded to change baits. That's when my line went taunt, not from a bite, but from a snag.

"Well, I at least caught a sunken log!" I laughed while slowly pulling it in, trying not to break my line.

"I'll free your hook, you're only a few meters out." Jakub said as he removed his shoes and socks.

"I'll help too!" said Aleksander, and soon the two waded out into the river and where hip deep searching for the cause of my snag.

"Here it is," Jakub held the object as he walked back to the shore, "but I don't think it is a log." Aleksander helped steady him as the two made their way back to dry land. Apparently, my hook caught a wooden box. Walnut by the looks of it. "There is something in it. I could feel it thumping in there." Jakub said while shaking his legs to help dry them off. And sure enough, we all heard the steady thump, thump, thump.

"That's the same rhythm my line was doing." Aleksander stated slightly alarmed. "And there is writing on the outside too, 'The Heart of Chopin Lies Within'."

"Well," I said nervously, "let's take a look and see..." Setting the box on the ground, I unlatched it and slowly opened the lid.

"It's a beating heart!" Aleksander cried jumping away.

"Human, by the looks of it." Jakub was more intrigued than concerned as he took a closer look as all I could do was just sit there in shock at the sight of a beating human heart before me.

"What is strange to me is, there is no blood or water inside. It's completely, dry."

At first, I thought Jakub was joking with us, but as I looked, it was true, no water or blood to be seen. Just the steady beating of what appeared to be a heart. Aleksander looked over my shoulder at it, and the three of us then looked at each other in amassment.

"There seems to be another box smaller box next to it." I said, pointing to what looked like a small wooden music box built inside the one holding this strange oddity.

"Well?" asked Jakub nudging me on.

"Yes, wind it." pressed Aleksander.

And so, a little fearful of touching the heart, I wound it up, and moved the leaver. After a few seconds, music came forth from the little box to the steady beat of the heart. Not like you would expect from one of its sizes, but that of the range of a full sized piano, just softer, and tinnier. And the tune that came forth was, the Spring Waltz, by Frederic Chopin.

"Beautiful." Said Aleksander.

"Wonderful." Added Jakub as the two sat down next to me. Soon, we each recognized the rhythm we each felt on our own fishing lines being played as the three components to the music we now heard. Butterflies were all I could think of. And for the next quarter hour, this little music box and the beating heart played the tune three times over before all was still again. Needless to say, it was an unusual view to see three grown men sitting together with smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes.

"Well," I said wiping my tears. "I have no words!"

"Agree." Sniffled Aleksander.

Jakub, just sitting there with his tears, said nothing.

"Here, let me." I pulled my kerchief and dried them.

"Thanks, friend." He said while clearing his throat. "Chopin did put his heart into his work, um, his music."

I said nothing in return, just gave him a smile as we sat and listened to the sounds of the Vistula flowing by.

"Has Chopin heart stopped beating?" Aleksander inquired. Not hearing anything, we looked down into the box, and gasped. The heart that was once made of beating flesh was now crystal clear with flakes of gold scattered within.

Seeing this, I placed my kerchief over the crystal heart, closed the lid and looked at my two new friends. "There is only one thing we can do now." I said as I gathered my things.

"No, Filip. Let us." Jakub said as he and Aleksander took my gear from me. "You carry him."

"Yes, we'll come back for our things later, but for right now..." Aleksander looked up at the trail that led us back up to Schronisko na Przystopie. And with me in the lead, off we went.

Our hike was one of solace and joy, warmth and discovery as the sights and sounds around us caused each of us to appreciate the inspiration and imagination of the Maestro. Once we arrived at the schronisko we sat at an outside table, and I called over a staff member.

"Yes, what can I get you gentlemen?" she asked.

"Three rounds, no, make it four rounds of Goldwasser." I requested.

"Yes, very good, sir." And a few minutes later she returned with our drinks and left us to ourselves.

We each took a glass, I took two as one was for the Maestro, Aleksander carefully opened the wooden box then Jakub gently pulled back the kerchief. We raised our glasses and made a simple toast.

"To Maestro Chopin!" I spoke.

"Maestro Chopin!" the other two replied. We held our glasses up as we watched the gold flakes within the sweet liqueur swirl and settle to the bottom of the glasses. I then gently poured one of mine over the gold laced crystal heart, allowing the gold leaf to cover it. We then drank ours together and wound the magical music box again to listen one last time before saying our farewells.

Truth be told, that was not our last meeting as each year on the anniversary of this day, we gather here at Schronisko na Przystopie where I lead the way down to the river Vistula while carrying the wooden box, where Aleksander picks the spot from which we will sit and listen to the little music box inside play the Spring Waltz. And as we do so, Jakub pours us, and the heart, some Goldwasser as we enjoy hearing the heartbeat of Chopin bring his music to life.

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