

A Personal Challenge

In 2008, after reading an online article about the long-preserved heart of Frédéric Chopin, I decided I would attempt to determine the identity of the illness that killed this beloved Polish composer. It was an illness that he endured for more than half his life. No one had clearly identified what this malady was, yet I thought I would challenge myself to see if I could figure it out.

I read every book and article on the subject I could find, including several written in French and Polish. I contacted musicologists, historians, and medical professionals. I taught myself forensic pathology. I read all of Chopin's biographies and listened to all of his music and really began to get a handle on this man. Finally, in 2010 I figured I'd gone about as far as I could go without laying my hands on his actual heart, a relic preserved in an amber liquid and hidden away in a crypt in the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw. Sharon and I visited that crypt later that year and while standing in front of it I decided then and there to write a book about the subject.

It wasn't easy. I hadn't written much of anything since college and my writing skills, if I had any, were very rusty. My mother had written a book when I was a teenager and I had spent many interesting hours with her in our kitchen during her struggles putting it all together. From her I learned about persistence and about the passion it takes to succeed at such a task. It took me about six months of very pleasant yet very hard work to write it. It took me much longer to get it published.

After reviewing all the theories I could find about the nature of Chopin's illness and entertaining a few more on my own, I had come up with more than ten possible diseases. Slowly, I worked my way through them all, wishing not to blow this diagnosis. After all, I was going public with my conclusion and I would be terribly embarrassed if I got it wrong. My deduction was that Chopin died from tuberculosis, although from a peculiar and rare form of that disease. I postulated that tuberculosis affected his heart, covering it with a thick layer of exudate that finally caused it to fail. But to prove that I needed to see his heart.

And so began many years of my attempts to get at his heart. Along the way I met hundreds of interesting people, visited places I never otherwise would have seen, and frequently had to put myself "out there," something fairly difficult for a little boy from Fargo. There were many times along the way when I felt it would be best if I simply gave it up. Discouragement was my ever-present partner.

Nevertheless, for the past few years I conducted a relentless public campaign to analyze Chopin's heart, contacting outstanding Polish scientists and Chopin scholars, trying to persuade them to take up this same quest. It worked! I had successfully persuaded them to investigate. Earlier this year (2014) thirteen prominent Polish leaders met in secret at midnight to open the Holy Cross crypt and view the heart of a

man who had died of a mysterious illness one hundred and sixty five years earlier. Unfortunately, I wasn't one of them, but not being a Pole made it essentially impossible for me to be included.

The conclusion of the two scientists present at the viewing was that it *was* tuberculosis that had felled Chopin. I felt very happy that I had arrived at the correct diagnosis, but at the same time felt very frustrated at not being able to see the heart myself. Those thirteen people were each sworn to secrecy and were under strict orders not to discuss this matter with anyone – ever. Until a couple of days ago the case seemed absolutely closed. Then I remembered my mom's persistence in the face of adversity. Eventually, through the power of personal relationships, I was able to obtain a stunningly clear color photograph of the heart of Frédéric Chopin. I was the fourteenth person in the world to see it.

After carefully studying this photo I have come to the conclusion that Chopin died from tuberculous pericarditis. This disease encased his heart in a thick layer of a stiff tissue that eventually caused his heart to fail. I feel vindicated. My medical training, my persistence, and my stubbornness (for once in my life!) had paid off.

For me, this case is now closed. I accomplished what I set out to achieve. The feeling of personal satisfaction is enormous and the long journey I took to get to this point now seems very worthwhile.

Steven Lagerberg November, 2014 Paris