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BIOGRAPHY
OF
JOSEF PILSUDSKI

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Joseph Pilsudski was born on December 5, 1867, at Zulow in the Vilna district of Russian Poland. The harsh treatment of the Poles under Russian rule and the anti-Russian feeling pervading his environment inspired him with a hatred of Russia and a desire to liberate his country from foreign hegemony. Pilsudski was suspended from medical school at Kharkov in 1886 and then returned to Vilna and was exiled for 5 years to Siberia in 1887 for allegedly conspiring to assassinate Czar Alexander III. Pilsudski returned home in 1892, joined the Polish Socialist party, and became its leader in 1894. He soon became editor of its clandestine newspaper, Robotnik (The Worker), but his was discovered in Lodz, and his wife Aleksandra were arrested in 1900. Pilsudski escaped in May 1901, and he settled in Cracow in Austrian Galicia.

Needing foreign aid for Poland's liberation, Pilsudski went to Japan in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War. There he met resistance from Roman Dmowski who had convinced the Japanese that Pilsudski's projects were not feasible. Joseph Pilsudski entered Russian Poland at the end of 1904 to assist the spread of the revolutionary movement in Russia. After the failure of the revolution in 1905 his Polish Socialist party split. Pilsudski's faction insisted on the party's primary goal of creating an independent Poland, whereas the left faction wished this goal to be deemphasized. In Austrian Poland, Pilsudski began to form a secret force in 1908 that would become a Polish national army. By 1910 Pilsudski was receiving assistance from Austrian military forces.

In World War I Pilsudski commanded the 1st Brigade of the Polish Legion against the Russians under Austro-Hungarian command. In order to free their soldiers for duty on the Western front, the Central Powers proclaimed the independence of Poland on November 5, 1916, and Pilsudski was appointed chief of the military section in November 1918 where he was proclaimed head of the Polish State Council. When the Central Powers refused to accept the Polish army as an organ of a Polish state, Pilsudski proved recalcitrant, was arrested by the Germans in July 1917, and jailed in Magdeburg.

Released in the fall of 1918, Pilsudski returned to Warsaw and began commander in chief of the Polish armed forces. Agreeing with the Polish National Committee, which was supported by the Western powers, he named Dmowski, right-wing leader, as first Polish deputy to the Paris Peace Conference. Poland's first Parliament in 1919 confirmed Pilsudski as chief of state, with Ignace Jan Paderewski as prime minister. Almost immediately, Pilsudski needed to defend Polish territory against attack by the Red Army, and initially he was successful in occupying much territory that had belonged to historical Poland but that had long been under Russian rule. He favored a federal organization of the new state to include these territories, whereas Dmowski favored their outright annexation to the Polish state. A Soviet counteroffensive reached the environs of Warsaw, but Pilsudski, created marshal of Poland on March 19, 1920, repelled it with the assistance of French general Maxime Weygand, ending the Soviet threat by August 1920.

The new constitution of March 1921, which limited executive powers considerably, caused Pilsudski's retirement from the presidency, although he continued as army chief of staff. Later he resigned this post on May 29, 1923, when a conservative government took power. Disillusioned with the workings of the parliamentary system, Pilsudski marched with troops on Warsaw on May 12, 1926, and though elected president by the National Assembly on May 31, 1926, he refused the position and served as minister of defense until his death.

From late 1926 to 1928, and again in 1930, Pilsudski served as Polish prime minister, ruling dictatorially and arresting members of the Sejm who opposed his rule. He was the real ruler of Poland, choosing the holders of important offices. His associates August Zaleski and Jozef Beck held the foreign office during the period, concluding a nonaggression treaty with the Soviet Union in July 1932 and another with Germany in January 1934, although Pilsudski himself had wanted to oppose Adolf Hitler's entry to power with force.

On May 12, 1935, Pilsudski died and was buried in Wawel Cathedral in Cracow. His collected works were published at Warsaw from 1930 to 1936 with selections appearing in English in 1931.