



General THADDEUS KOSCIUSZKO

MASTER MILITARY MIND OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

by Major Ernest L. Cuneo: SAT. EVE. POST Oct 75, Bicentennial Feature

It is one of the ironies of history that had General Thaddeus Kosciuszko been born with a name as easily pronounced as General Robert E. Lee, Ulysses Simpson Grant or John J. Pershing, his name would resound throughout Western civilization as one of the foremost military geniuses of all time.

But a name which is difficult to pronounce is almost impossible to remember. Phonetically, the name is pronounced Kos-Choose-Ko.

He was of the towering stature of a Hannibal, or a Caesar. Most Americans are quite unaware of the fact that the military genius of this man is largely responsible for the victory which gave America its independence. There are thousands of memorials throughout these United States to General Lafayette, General Pulaski, and General von Steuben; but the military giant who towered over them all goes unnoticed. Though the military was his first profession, Thaddeus Kosciuszko was a Renaissance man. He was a painter, an architect, a composer, a scholar and a philosopher. He was accepted as an intellectual equal by Jefferson; he was also a mystical visionary of human rights scarcely second to Abraham Lincoln.

One would think that the life of a man who was the master military mind of the American Revolution would have received the closest attention of historians. Actually, his papers have not yet been fully collected, much less an authoritative biography been written.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko did not come by these talents accidentally. His life confirms the maxim that genius is the talent for infinite pains. He was a prodigious toiler all of his life. He burned the midnight oil; then sentries awakened him so that he might study before dawn.

He was born in the Polesi district of Poland, of the landed gentry. He was descended of a famous line of valiant Polish officers. However, they were not of the Polish grand nobility, as was Count Casimir Pulaski, youthful Chief of Cavalry of the Continental Army. The father of Thaddeus Kosciuszko owned a small village in this district. As a boy, Kosciuszko had as playmates the sons of the peasants of the village. There, he developed a love for the common people, as deep as that of Abraham Lincoln.

Technically, belonging to neither the titled aristocracy nor the peasantry, he proved to be the common denominator in uniting them in the cause of Poland. His immortality in Poland is roughly comparable to a montage of General George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in the United States. In Poland the name of Kosciuszko is an abbreviation

for the soul of Poland and the determination that it will never die.

His brilliant career in the American Revolution was followed by an even more spectacular one as the single world figure embodying the exalted spiritual qualities of both the American and French Revolutions. The roots were in his childhood. His mother had given him Plutarch's *Lives* to read. The lad's imagination was fired by the heroic battle against tyrants by Timoleon of Corinth. It proved to be his life model.

His essential military talent which brought victory to the American Cause was his magnificent insight into the use of terrain as a natural defense. His decisive service to the American Revolution was in defeating the key British strategy of severing New England from the rest of the Colonies by control of the Hudson Valley. Colonel Kosciuszko prevented this at the Battle of Saratoga in the north and by his impregnable fortifications of West Point in the south.

The Battle of Saratoga, fought in October of 1777, is unanimously called one of the ten most important battles in recorded history. The reason is that when British General "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne surrendered, both France and Spain were convinced that the Continental Army could win, and thereupon entered into the war as allies of the Colonies.

The campaign of "Gentleman Johnny" was brilliantly conceived. It was a three-pronged offensive. Colonel Barry St. Leger was to come down the Mohawk Valley from Lake Ontario, in a flanking movement; General Burgoyne was to hammer down Lake Champlain and Lake George to Albany; and General Clinton was to come up the Hudson from New York City, to provide the anvil for "Gentleman Johnny's" descending hammer on the Continental Army. Obviously enough, the hammer and anvil had to be prevented from meeting. Only twenty miles north of Albany, Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko selected a natural fortress in the terrain, and he made it both an invulnerable fort and a trap by his brilliant engineering.

In briefest terms, Colonel Kosciuszko found a little mount which controlled the narrow road between it and the river and he crowned it with artillery. He had carefully selected the mount; it was just below Mill Creek, flowing into the Hudson. His selection provided a water barrier which prohibited the famed bayonet charge of the Redcoats on the American Right flank. Moreover, Mill Creek's tributaries had formed four deep ravines running from northeast to southwest, natural breastworks which made infantry

attack on the American center impossible. Thereafter, to crown the masterpiece, General Kosciuszko placed the heaviest concentration of American artillery on the higher Bemis Heights, commanding both the river and the ravines.

"Gentleman Johnny" had no alternative but to attack the American left flank. This movement had been foreseen by Kosciuszko and the Continental sharpshooters were waiting. Brigadier Frazer, the soul of the British forces, was shot, and when that noble soldier pitched from his saddle, the British Crown in the Colonies fell with him.

General Horatio Gates, Commanding General of the American forces, attested that the genius of Thaddeus Kosciuszko was the decisive factor in these words: "Let us be honest. In war as in medicine, natural causes not under our control do much. The great tacticians of the campaign were hills and forests, which Colonel Kosciuszko was skillful enough to select for my encampments."

His masterpiece of strategy was at Saratoga; but his greatest work of military art was the creation of West Point. As at Saratoga, it was in the selection of the site. In all of the vast Hudson Valley Colonel Kosciuszko selected the one point where the river bends around a high promontory controlling both angles of the stream. On a grand scale, he chained the river, then placed his controlling batteries on the high plateau. Thus, the all-powerful British Navy was blocked from the south; never again could the British pincer off New England. Colonel Kosciuszko's intellectual triumph at West Point was greater than at Saratoga. This, because the fortress was too formidable to attack.

The British were forced to revise their grand strategy. They abandoned the North and the Hudson Valley to open operations in the South. Thus, Colonel Kosciuszko's greatest victory was at West Point, the battle his Majesty's forces dared not fight.

Incidents during his tour of duty at West Point afford some insight into his heart. In personal habits, he was abstemious to the point of asceticism. But, when even beyond this he began to appear emaciated, his concerned brother officers discovered that he was giving his rations to sick British prisoners of war. Again, his quarters were so spare that his brother officers astounded him one day by insisting that he accept a manservant — a slave named Agrippa. Colonel Kosciuszko protested that he had no idea of what to do with a slave. Told that he might do as he wished, he turned to Agrippa and told him he was a free man.



Asked by General Washington why he was drawing no pay, he answered simply that the unpaid enlisted men needed money more than he. He refused offered promotions to Brigadier General. He was so self-effacing that General Washington remarked at West Point, "You are too modest." Perhaps the best insight into his spirit is his remote rock garden down from the main battlements. It was on a broad ledge jutting out from the living rock of the granite cliff. At the north end of it he diverted a sparkling brook to form a splashing fountain. This retreat suggests that, beneath his military genius, lay the brooding stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and the compassion of St. Francis of Assisi.

When the British switched their offensive to the Carolinas, Colonel Kosciusz-

ko was made Engineer of the South. His commanding generals, Gates and Greene, relied on him completely in the selection of campsites, transport and fortifications. The Continental Army waged the same Kosciuszko guerilla-engineering tactics that it did against "Gentleman Johnny" on his march to Saratoga. Again, the joining of the British forces was prevented. They retired to Yorktown, to await reinforcements by sea.

The expected relief by the British Navy of General Cornwallis was thwarted by the victory of the French West Indies Fleet in the Battle of the Chesapeake Capes. The French Fleet and the Continental Army closed in on the surrounded British. Cornwallis surrendered. After the surrender but be-

fore news reached the southern theater, Colonel Kosciuszko led the action against James Island at Charlestown, in which bloody foray the last shot of the Revolution was fired.

Thaddeus Kosciuszko was not just another lucky General. His professional military qualifications stood out like a lighthouse as he arrived with letters from Prince Czartoryski to General Washington's second-in-command, General Henry Lee. As a youth, he was first in his college. He was first King's Cadet at Poland's West Point and he was first at the advanced Ecole Militaire in Paris. General Washington's staff, like the generals of Mr. Lincoln's Army, were to receive their training in battle.

He had scarcely unpacked his bags before the anxious authorities begged his assistance in devising a defense for the city. In doing so, Colonel Kosciuszko planned and effected a defense against amphibious warfare for a young nation which had no navy at all.

A sea-land pincer was closing on the Continental Army. General Washington, badly beaten in the Battle of New York and driven north to White Plains, was falling back across New Jersey to Philadelphia. Lord Cornwallis relentlessly pursued. Out at sea, off the Delaware Capes, His Majesty's Fleet, under command of Admiral Howe, made ready to sail up the Delaware River to attack Philadelphia by sea. Washington retreated across the Delaware. Cornwallis gloated that he had trapped the fox at last. But down at the narrow turn of the Delaware, Colonel Kosciuszko designed and built, by Herculean effort, throughout that autumn, forts on Billingsport Island, which controlled both banks of the Delaware. The river was corked. The British sea-land pincers couldn't close.

General Washington, falling back across the Delaware just above Trenton, was not fully apprised of this. With his back to the wall, he sent orders to Philadelphia to build fortifications in preparation for a last-ditch siege. It must have been with enormous relief that he learned that Colonel Kosciuszko had protected the rear of the Continental Army. The rest is dramatic history, how on Christmas Night Washington recrossed the Delaware to smite the Hessians at Trenton and followed it up with the blow at Princeton which sent Cornwallis reeling back to New Brunswick. Down in the Delaware Bay, Admiral Howe, after evaluating the cost of reducing the Kosciuszko forts, stood out to sea. Colonel Kosciuszko had held Philadelphia by making its river approaches too formidable to attack.

Colonel Kosciuszko was rushed north. The strategic key to the Hudson Valley was between Lake Champlain and Lake George, at Fort Ticonderoga. Colonel Kosciuszko at once outlined full defenses, but the Kosciuszko plans were shelved. "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne seized the very heights Colonel Kosciuszko had regarded as controlling. So controlling that the Americans were forced to evacuate without offering battle. Had Colonel Kosciuszko's advice been taken, the Burgoyne invasion

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from page 7)

would have been stopped then; the Battle of Saratoga would not have had to be fought.

The American Revolution had illuminated the military art of General Kosciuszko. The ensuing years were to reveal the magnitude of his soul. When Kosciuszko set sail for his native land, it was with heavy heart. These United States were free, but heavier claims were being hammered on Poland.

He was made Major General of the Crown Army. He trained a Polish militia, the equivalent of the American Continental Army. He was no Hamlet. He took arms against Poland's sea of troubles when Catherine the Great started the infamous second partitioning of Poland, nor did he falter when Prussia and Austria entered the lists against him. Poland's peasant army went down fighting, and General Kosciuszko went down with it, leading the last desperate charge. Saberred at the back of the head and lanced repeatedly as he lay unconscious, he lay at death's door in the prison of Peter and Paul. He was by that time too powerful a spiritual force to kill physically, so Catherine the Great left him to die. In an epic battle of wills, he beat both death and Catherine. When she died, Czar Paul rushed to offer him his freedom. The paralyzed man refused it unless the 12,000 Polish survivors were also freed. The Czar struck a bargain; they could go home to Poland, but he must accept life in exile. Paradoxically, to free his people, he gave up his homeland.

Stockholm and London received him with tumultuous welcomes as an indomitable Spartacus in defeat. He returned to America and subsequently returned again to Europe on secret mission for Thomas Jefferson to settle the sea war of the French and Americans. He spurned Napoleon as a dictator.

When Napoleon met his Waterloo, Czar Alexander I all but begged Kosciuszko to become viceroy of the Kingdom of Poland. Iron-willed Kosciuszko refused: it was Poland absolutely free or nothing. Then the czar offered to champion Poland's cause at the Congress of Vienna. Kosciuszko went there expecting that his objective had been reached at last.

But under pressure of his allies, the czar gave way; Poland remained partitioned. Kosciuszko's spirit was not broken, but his body was. He refused to step on Polish soil while another flag flew over it. The untold riches he was offered he could have used. He was a poor man when he went to the little village of Soleure, Switzerland to die. But it is still a legend that he shared his meager sustenance with the poorest in the village.

A sigh of relief swept through the royal palaces of Europe when on October 15, 1817, he died, for they felt and believed that the spirit of Poland died with him.

But it appeared that neither his spirit nor the spirit of Poland had died. To the field outside of Krakow where his little army had battled Russian heavy artillery with scythes, came a few very poor Po-

lish peasants. With no means for a monument, they simply deposited a few handfuls of earth from their little villages. Like wildfire, the word spread through Poland. Hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of the poorest peasants came with little containers of Polish soil. They who could not raise their flag could raise a monument. A handmade mountain was raised of great base and well over 200 feet high.

To their everlasting glory the Founding Fathers repaid part of the Republic's debt before Kosciuszko died. When he returned to Philadelphia on August 18, 1797, the American people inundated him with affection. As the ship *Adrianna* swept by Fort Mifflin which he had built, its guns thundered a thirteen-gun salute. All Philadelphia crowded to the wharf. It cheered deliriously as he was carried from her deck, believing for an awkward moment that he was being hoisted in triumph. A wave of pity swept through the crowd when it was perceived the man could not walk. But the reaction was instant and spectacular for that staid city: the horses from his carriage were unharnessed, and the city fathers themselves pulled the vehicle through cheering thousands to his dwelling.

President Adams sent a courier. Wrote the second President: "I hope you will find all the consolation, tranquility and satisfaction you desire after the glorious record you have made in a greater theater. On my arrival in Philadelphia, I hope to have the pleasure to receive you." But it was with Thomas Jefferson, then Vice-President, that General Kosciuszko formed his deepest friendship.

Philadelphia continued to lavish its affection upon him. Love has curative powers. Within months he could walk. To the little house at 301 Pine Street came a string of distinguished visitors: the Duke of Orleans, future King of France, cabinet members, senators, governors and diplomats from abroad; but its most distinguished visitor was Vice-President Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson became the executor of his will — a will in which General Kosciuszko directed that his American assets be used to purchase the freedom of slaves and furnish them with both land and education.

These distinguished gentlemen exchanged several interesting documents, among them false passports forged by Vice-President Jefferson for General Kosciuszko. The purpose was to get the general to Paris to end the undeclared naval war between the United States and France. Smuggled out at dead of night by Thomas Jefferson himself, General Kosciuszko sailed for Paris via Lisbon. General Kosciuszko apparently accomplished his mission: hostilities ceased after he arrived in Paris.

Thomas Jefferson wrote of General Kosciuszko: "He is as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known, and of that liberty which is to go to all, and not to the few and rich alone."

The most significant tribute to General Kosciuszko came from the Commander-in-Chief, General George Washington himself. General Washington's letters

reveal the growth of his respect. "There is one in Philadelphia who I am told is clever, but him I have never seen," General Washington wrote after his Trenton victory, alluding to Colonel Kosciuszko's decisive fortifications at Fort Miffling. After the Battle of Saratoga, General Washington wrote the Congress, "I would take the liberty to mention that I have been informed that the Engineer of the Northern Army (Cosieski, I think his name is) is a gentleman of science and merit. From the character I have had of him, he is deserving of notice." When General Washington congratulated him on his West Point masterpiece, Colonel Kosciuszko answered that it was God who created the promontory and the river, and added that the site was ideal for a military academy. General Washington replied, "Colonel Kosci — do you mind if I call you Colonel Kosci — you are too modest."

When Kosciuszko arrived in Philadelphia in 1797, General Washington, well aware of the worldwide acclaim bestowed on him, wrote:

I beg you to be assured that no one has a higher respect and veneration for your character than I have; and no one more seriously wished, during your arduous struggle in the cause of liberty and your country, that it might be crowned with success.

But the ways of providence are inscrutable and mortals must submit. I pray you to believe that at all times and under any circumstances, it would make me happy to see you at my last retreat from which I never expect to be more than twenty miles again.

At his historic Farewell to his Officers, surrounded by the resplendent panoply of a magnificent staff, the Commander-in-Chief singled out General Thaddeus Kosciuszko. General Washington then presented General Kosciuszko with his pistols and his sword.

General Washington, a man of forbidding dignity and icy reserve, followed this with one of the most dramatic accolades in American history. The officers of the Continental Army had formed the Order of the Cincinnati. General Washington himself nominated General Kosciuszko for membership. The Officers of the Order then presented General Washington the highest symbol of their regard, the cameo ring of the Order.

Signifying the highest respect, affection, and indeed reverence for their Commander-in-Chief, it must have been among the most prized of his possessions. Thus, when General Washington took from his finger the ring of the Cincinnati, bowed, and presented it to General Kosciuszko, he was bestowing upon the brilliant Polish military genius the highest accolade of the Continental Army.

It is a fair interpretation that General Washington was amplifying by deed what General Gates had declared at Saratoga: "Let us be honest: the military skill of General Kosciuszko is as responsible for the victory of the Revolutionary War as it was at the Battle of Saratoga."