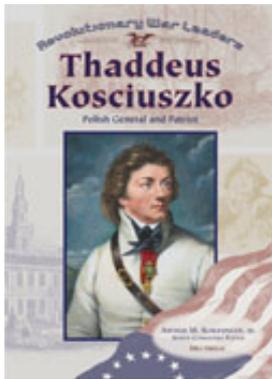

Thaddeus Kosciuszko: Polish General and Patriot by Meg Greene (2002), 80 Pages.



The Chelsea House Publishers came up with a fine idea of offering concise biographies of outstanding personalities who played an important role during crucial periods of American history. All of them are written for pre-teen youngsters, and judging by this particular book, they can be described as a success. These books cover colonial times, in all several dozens of personalities were selected.

From the start the editors realize that one cannot burden 9-12-year-old kids with an avalanche of historical information. Consequently, the author Meg Greene wisely avoids too many details of Kosciuszko's early life, and the same applies to the activities upon his return to Europe. It is the American story that she primarily recounts. Yes, one learns that he was born in 1746, one of four children, and grew up in eastern Poland under fairly modest circumstances. His father owned a small estate but died when Thaddeus was 12 years old. The mother struggled raising the family, but thanks to fortunate circumstances the young man's education took an excellent turn. Unquestionably his intelligence, great talent for mathematics and engineering, and a high degree of social responsibility played an important role. No wonder that when he landed in America in 1776, he was recognized as a highly gifted individual. His career with the young American forces was illustrious, and the leaders of the American revolution, both the military and civilian, held him in a very high esteem, particularly because Kosciuszko had an uncanny talent for building inventive fortifications and ingenious defenses. He began with excellent plans for Philadelphia and the Delaware River, which resulted in his promotion to colonel of engineers. Soon he found himself in the area north of New York City. His fabulous suggestions for the defense of Ticonderoga as well as the work at the Fort West Point lead to the defeat of British forces in the North. Soon similar triumphs were achieved on the Southern fronts, ending with the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781. He was among the first to enter Charleston, South Carolina. Top military commanders of the American armies Gen. Horatio Gates and Gen. Nathanael Greene became great admirers of the Polish officer. It was not only his excellent education acquired in the Polish and French military schools that played a role but also his unusual personal qualities. One could not imagine a more convincing democrat in his public and private life. Thomas Jefferson became his close friend and paid him the highest compliment by writing that Kosciuszko was "as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known" (p.73). He was promoted to a general and became an honorary member of the distinguished Society of the Cincinnati. When he returned to America for a short visit in 1797, he asked that his American estate be sold to purchase the freedom of slaves, "giving them liberty in my name" (p.72). – Not many people know about this bit of historiana: in the Memorial of Washington D.C., the coat Jefferson is wearing is a gift from his friend Kosciuszko, whose own statue faces the White House.

A minor note: the book could use a more careful proofreading. On page 4 the name of our hero is spelled Kosciuszko, then Koaciuszko and finally Koacuiszko. Also, the reader is puzzled about a color map on page 6, which features Prussia in 1826. This map must belong to some other book!

For the record, in our Library we have a scholarly biography of Kosciuszko written by Prof. James C. Pula. This book was reviewed in March of 1999.

George E. Suboczewski