



# POLISH INDEPENDENCE SONGBOOK

## Rota (1908) | The Oath

Music: Feliks Nowowiejski

Lyrics: Maria Konopnicka

### Song description

“Rota” (The Oath) – a Polish patriotic song from 1908, inspired by the resistance against anti-Polish repression in the Polish lands occupied by Prussia. The text was written by Polish poet and writer Maria Konopnicka <sup>1</sup>, and the music by composer Feliks Nowowiejski. The first public performance took place on 15 July 1910 in Kraków, during the ceremonial unveiling of the Monument of Victory over the Teutonic Knights in the Battle of Grunwald (1410). It was most popular up until 1918 and during plebiscites and the Silesian uprisings.

### Historical note

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided between 1772 and 1795 by Prussia, Russia and Austria. Prussia occupied the western districts of Greater Poland and Pomerania. Poles did not reconcile with the loss of independence, so the Prussian state gradually increased anti-Polish repressions. It closed down Polish schools, associations and publishing houses, removed the Polish language from offices and from all public space. Polish children were not allowed to pray in Polish during school religion lessons.

Resistance to Germanisation was so widespread and strong that Prussia ultimately lost this „longest war of modern Europe”.



*Maria Konopnicka. Fig. J. Buchbinder (Tygodnik Ilustrowany 1883 no. 39). Source: Polona*

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Stanisława Konopnicka, née Wasiłowska, codenames and pseudonyms: “M. K.”, “K.”, “Ko-mar”, “Jan Sawa”, “Marko”, “Jan Wareź”, “Humanus”, “Ursus”, “Mruczystaw Pazurek” (born May 23, 1842 in Suwałki, died October 8, 1910 in Lwów) – Polish poet and novelist of the positivist period, literary critic, journalist and translator; one of the greatest writers in the history of Polish literature. Source: [Wikipedia, culture.pl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Konopnicka)



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The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of a particular intensification of the Germanization policy in the Greater Poland region. Maria Konopnicka's "Rota" perfectly reflected the mood of that time, the absolute ferocity of Polish resistance and the will to fight until the victorious end. The piece is a four-verse hymnal song. Individual verses are separated by a two-line chorus.

The first verse is a declaration of remaining on ancestral land ("We won't forsake the land we came from"), faithfulness to native culture ("We won't let our speech be buried") and a reference to the historical roots of Polishness ("We are the Polish nation, the Polish people, from the royal line of Piast"). The verse ends with an oath to fight against Germanization ("We won't let the foe Germanize us!"). The chorus ("So help us God") is the sealing of this oath.



*Prussian Deportations painting by Wojciech Kossak, 1909. Source: Wikipedia*

The next verse announces the battle to the end, even at the cost of shedding blood ("To the last blood drop in our veins, we will defend our spirit") until the final victory ("Till into dust and ash shall fall, the Teutonic windstorm"). The reference to the history of the conflict with the Teutonic Order is a reaction to Prussian propaganda, which directly referred to the Order's actions against the Kingdom of Poland and which considered Prussia to be a continuation of the Order's state. The last line of this verse reminds us that the Polish home and the Polish family are the main force of Polish resistance against Germanization ("Every doorsill will be a fortress for us").

The third verse is a protest against Prussian policy ("The German won't spit in our face, nor Germanize our children") and a harbinger of mobilization for armed struggle against the partitioner ("Our host will arise in arms, the Holy Spirit will lead the way"). The verse ends with a reference to one of the symbols of Stanisław Wyspiański's poetic drama "The Wedding" ("We'll set out when the golden horn calls"). The last verse is the final declaration of the struggle of Poles who will not passively come to terms with the partitioner's policy ("We won't have Poland's name defamed, we won't step into a coffin alive"), a reminder of the heritage and national pride of Poles ("In Poland's name, in its worship, we lift our foreheads proudly").



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The song ends with a declaration of faith in the victorious end of this struggle (“The grandson will regain his forefathers’ land”), which again seals the last refrain as an oath.

“Rota” was performed for the first time by a choir of representatives from all the partitions during the ceremony of unveiling the Grunwald Monument in Krakow (July 15, 1910). The song gained great popularity in the Greater Poland region, but also in Pomerania and Upper Silesia. After the regaining of independence, “Rota” was considered for recognition as the national anthem of Poland. Maria Konopnicka’s song was also sung during martial law in the 1980s. The reference to the history of the conflict with the Teutonic Order was then replaced with the words “Till into dust and ash shall fall, the Soviet windstorm” and the last two verses were omitted. In 1920–1922, “Rota” was the anthem of Central Lithuania, and in 1990–1991, the anthem of the Polish National Territorial Region as part of the Republic of Lithuania. Today, this song is also the anthem of the League of Polish Families and the Polish People’s Party.

From 1894, the German Eastern Marches Society (*Deutscher Ostmarkenverein, DOV*), commonly known as “Hakata” (from the names of the founders: Hansemann, Kennemann and Tiedemann), operated in Greater Poland. It was an organization of Prussian nationalists strongly supported by the state, who conducted intense anti-Polish activities on Polish lands seized by Prussia. It consisted of propaganda, buying out Polish land and transferring it to Germans, as well as shaping the law in such a way as to make the maintenance and development of cultural and economic potential as difficult as possible for the Polish population. It was on the initiative of “Hakata” activists that a law was issued in 1904 banning the construction of residential buildings on newly acquired land without the consent of the German authorities.



*Michał Drzymala with his wagon in Grodzisk Mazowiecki (1908). Source: Wikipedia*



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This provoked a protest that went down in legend as “The Drzymała Case” (“Drzymała’s Wagon “)<sup>2</sup>.

In 1908, the Reichstag (German parliament) passed an overtly anti-Polish law on associations, which only allowed for meetings in languages other than German in places where the Polish population constituted more than 60% of the population. From the very beginning, the policy of forced Germanization met with stiff resistance from the people of Greater Poland. It was against this that they fought the “longest war of modern Europe,” which they were decisively winning in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hakata’s actions brought the opposite consequences of those intended. Instead of buying Polish land, it was the Germans living in Greater Poland who lost their land to the Poles. Repressive laws brought more harm than advantage – a perfect example is the case of “Drzymała’s wagon,” which was known in the other partitions and in Europe, bringing the Prussians a spectacular defeat in the propaganda war with the Poles. The Germans were also losing the economic war. The Polish cooperative movement turned out to be a powerful force, gradually driving German capital out of Greater Poland.

*Compiled by Piotr Pacak*

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<sup>2</sup> Michał Drzymała (born September 13, 1857 in Zdrój, died April 25, 1937 in Grabówno) – Polish peasant from the Poznań region. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Drzymała became famous because of his dispute with the Prussian authorities in 1904–1909 concerning the possibility of building a house on a plot of land purchased in 1904 from a German merchant in the village of Kaisertreu (now Drzymałowo). Prussian law required the approval of the state administration to erect the building. Implementing the policy of Germanization, the authorities selectively used this law to the detriment of the Polish population. In this situation, Drzymała bought a circus car in which he began to live. The Prussian authorities wanted to remove it, arguing that the car, which had been standing in one place for over 24 hours, was a residence. Facing this situation, Drzymała moved the cart a short distance every day, which gave him the argument that, as a mobile vehicle, it was not subject to the provisions of the building law. For several years, there was a judicial and administrative fight in which legal tricks were applied. The Prussian authorities harassed Drzymała for minor transgressions and finally managed to remove the wagon. Drzymała then lived in a mud hut, which was soon demolished due to fire regulation violations. So Drzymała was forced to sell the plot. Eventually, he bought another one, with an old house, the repair of which did not require the approval of the authorities. Source: [Wikipedia](#)



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