A PIANIST'S STORY

What Happened to a Polish Musician After Nazis Attacked Her Country

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

MARYLA JONAS slipped into New York without fanfare of any sort and played a piano recital at Carnegie Hall on Feb. 25. Nothing was known about her except that she had come from South America and that she was Polish by birth and training. Her recital drew a tiny audience that seemed lost in Carnegie Hall. But her notices the next morning were almost all-out praise, and now another recital has been scheduled for March 30.

These are the surface facts. Behind them is a story of early success, then suffering, despair and struggle. It is a story of and for our times. It illuminates how human beings have been torn from their homes, families and work. The difference in Miss Jonas' case is that her story has a tolerable ending.

Maryla Jonas was born in Warsaw in 1911. At 7 she began to study the piano; at 9 she made her debut with the Warsaw Philharmonic in a Mozart concerto. At 11 she was invited to play for Paderewski, and he gave her lessons whenever he was in Poland. At 15 she made her debut in Germany and toured the country. For three years she worked with Emil Sauer, the famous pianist. Later she won the Chopin Prize of 1932 and the International Prize of Vienna in 1933. Her career was growing. She was married to a distinguished Polish criminologist. She was happy and successful.

When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939 Miss Jonas and her family were in Warsaw. They lived through the daily bombing. They did not hear the city's radio playing the Chopin Polonaise with which the heroic officials signalized their defiance. She and her husband and parents and brothers and sisters wandered in cellars and shelters—changing their refuges as the areas around them were smashed by bombs.

Gestapo Takes Over

Resistance was crushed and the "Herrenvolk" moved in. Miss Jonas' home was gone. She went to her father's place. Her husband and brothers had taken up arms and were somewhere with the retreating Polish forces. The Germans requisitioned her father's house. She and her family found quarters here and there. Finally they were hauled in during a periodic round-up.

Miss Jonas was questioned by a Gestapo man. He knew of her record as a pianist and urged her to go to Berlin, where she could play—and eat. She refused. She was kept locked up.

After many weeks she was released. A high German officer, who had heard her in Germany and admired her music, got her out. He advised her to make for Berlin and the Brazilian Embassy there; possibly she could get some help, since her sister, who had married a Viennese Jew, had migrated to Brazil when the Nazis moved into Austria.

Miss Jonas walked from Warsaw to Cracow; from Cracow to Katowice. It took weeks; she doesn't remember exactly how many. Somehow she got to Berlin. She scarcely ever ate. She slept in barns, along roadsides. The Brazilian Embassy was more than kind. It arranged a false passport for her that made her out to be the wife of the Brazilian Ambassador's son, and with him she flew out to Lisbon. She made her way by ship to Rio de Janeiro.

When she reached Rio in 1940 she was a sick woman. She spent months in sanatoriums. Her nervous state was not alleviated when news came that members of her family had disappeared or been killed. She did not touch the piano; she could not.

Artur Rubinstein, himself a Polish pianist, came to Rio. He visited Miss Jonas and urged her to play, reminding her that it was the duty of surviving Poles to show that their people had given something to the world. Furthermore, she must work to help rescue others. She agreed, but she could not play.

One morning he phoned her and asked her to come over to the Municipal Opera House to hear him rehearse his program for that evening. She didn't want to go, but her sister insisted she could not offend him. Miss Jonas smiles when she tells the story. "It was a put-up job," she says.

Plays at Last

Rubinstein played. Then he asked her to try out the piano so that he might test the acoustics. She pleaded that her fingers were stiff. He insisted. She recalls that it was 2:30 P. M. when she sat down at the keyboard. She played in a daze. It was 7:30 P. M. when she got up. The hall was filling with the audience for Rubinstein's concert which was to start at 8. Rubinstein himself had not eaten. But she had played.

A few days later she played for a gathering of musicians and critics Rubinstein had invited. A recital in Rio was arranged. Ernesto de Quesada, a manager, began to book her, and in the next three years she played all over South and Central America. She was successful, but Quesada, who has not, she says, taken a penny from her, told her she must play in New York; otherwise, he could not get sizable fees for her.

A New York manager who heard her would not risk any money on bringing her here and giving her a recital. At first she could not raise the $2,000 needed for that undertaking. Finally she induced a Mexican friend to hire her for eight radio concerts for that sum.

"I was lucky," she says, "but what if a person with talent cannot raise the money? There is something wrong with such a musical system."

She knew she had to make good at her debut. And for three days and nights she did not sleep before that recital. She thought it was all nerves. It turned out that she had a badly infected tooth.

And on the morning after her debut she had not only the notices but a cable from Poland that one of her two surviving brothers was found to be dead—another Nazi victim.