HARDLY any fragment of Franklin's life seems to have escaped the diligent search and curiosity of his numerous biographers. Hence, it was surprising to find that the episode to be reported here is unknown to the American scholars.\(^1\) This is probably so since its account remains buried in the unpublished memoirs of a Polish princess and appears to be quoted only by relatively little known Polish sources, yet it offers a fascinating glimpse of Franklin's remarkable personal charisma and empathy.\(^2\) Indeed, in this brief anecdote he plays the part of a shrewd and skillful amateur psychotherapist, a role which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been brought to light before.

The episode in question is described in a Polish monograph published almost a century ago, and has been translated faithfully from that work.\(^3\) According to its author, the cited anecdote was taken from a handwritten manuscript, written in French, of the memoirs of Princess Izabella Czartoryska (1746–1835), the wife of a Polish aristocrat of the highest rank and a man who came close to becoming a king of Poland, Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski. The Princess was surely one of the more colorful women of the late 18th century. Wealthy, pampered, bright and cultivated, she was perennially pursued by powerful men and moved from one stormy love affair to another.\(^4\) At least three of her six acknowledged children are believed to have been illegitimate, including a daughter allegedly fathered by the last King of Poland, Stanislaw-August Poniatowski, who abdicated in 1795. Two years prior to the episode recounted here, the Princess had given birth to a son, whose father was Prince Nikolai Repnin, the ambassador of Catherine the
Great in Warsaw. Her husband, whom she had married at the age of 15, seemed to be too busy with political affairs and intrigues to pay much attention to his wife and her liaisons. In the spring of 1772, the Princess and Prince Repnin traveled together to London and were later joined by her husband. During her lengthy stay in that city she apparently suffered from a deep depression and her husband sought to cheer her up by taking her for a visit to the famous American. As Franklin wrote in August of that year, “Learned and ingenious foreigners that come to England almost all make a point of visiting me; for my reputation is still higher abroad than here.” The Czartoryskis surely satisfied the criteria for being “learned and ingenious” foreigners. When the Princess met Franklin, she was twenty-six years old, he—sixty-six. The following is her personal account of their remarkable encounter:

“I was ill, in a state of melancholia, and writing my testament and farewell letters. Wishing to distract me, my husband took me to Franklin. On the way my husband explained to me who Franklin was and to what he owed his fame, since I barely knew that a second hemisphere existed. Franklin had a noble face with an expression of engaging kindness. Surprised by my immobility, he took my hands and gazed at me saying: pauvre jeune femme. He then opened a harmonium, sat down, and played long. The music made a strong impression on me and tears began flowing from my eyes. Then Franklin sat by my side and looking with compassion said, ‘Madam, you are cured.’ Indeed, that moment was a reaction in my state of melancholia. Franklin offered to teach me how to play the harmonium—I accepted without hesitation, hence he gave me twelve lessons. I have retained memory of him for my whole life.”

That effective music therapy most likely involved not a harmonium but a harmonica, or “armonica” as Franklin called it, a musical instrument which he invented around 1761 by adapting the principle of musical glasses, and of which he wrote: “The advantages of this instrument are that its tones are incomparably sweet beyond those of any other.” The princess seemed to agree. It is notable that Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who developed a form of treatment of assorted ailments through hypnotism, and to whom historians of psychiatry have referred to as the “historical godfather of psychoanalysis,” used the harmonica to provide background music for his therapeutic sessions. Franklin met Mesmer in Paris and in 1784 became the presiding officer of a commission appointed by Louis XVI to review Mesmer’s claims that his “animal magnetism” constituted an effective and legitimate
medical treatment. Benjamin Rush rejected Mesmer's pretentions to cure diseases, but conceded that he demonstrated the influence of the imagination and the will on diseases.

Despite her apparently dramatic response to Franklin's ministration, the Princess' "cure" appeared to be rather short-lived. It is true that in December 1772 an observer, the Duke de Lauzun, her future lover, met her at a party in London and found her to be charming, gay and coquettish, hardly a picture of melancholic immobility. Yet only next year the Princess, apparently torn by conflict between her new love for the dashing young Duke and her ties to both her husband and Prince Repnin, developed frequent and violent "attacks of nerves" and fainting spells, symptoms which prompted Duke de Lauzun to consult in secret the famous Dutch physician, Gaubius. In November 1773, following a tearful scene with the Duke, the Princess made an apparently serious suicide attempt by drinking poison. That torrid romance between the Princess and Duke de Lauzun, who subsequently fought in the American Revolution, went on for several years and resulted in the birth of a son. More love affairs followed as well as tragedy, when her oldest daughter burned to death and, almost at the same time, her newly born daughter died. The Princess reacted to these tragic losses by becoming temporarily paralyzed, but was reportedly cured by an electric therapy. Her biography suggests that she was a neurotic and restless woman, one prone to bouts of melancholia and hysteria. In this, however, she was not much different from many other prominent women of her times. Noteworthy is the fact that despite her chaotic and stormy younger years, her reckless promiscuity and emotional instability, the Princess displayed in the second half of her life admirable creativity, courage in the face of many adversities, sense of humor, loyalty to her family and country, and serenity. She reportedly remained intellectually alert and active until her death at age 89. In this respect she was not unlike Franklin, of whom Benjamin Rush wrote that he "possessed his reason to the last day of his life." Franklin had made a lasting impression on her, as evidenced not only by her professed remembrance of him, but also by the fact that she kept his portrait and referred to him in the catalogue of her art collection as the man who "tore off the thunder from the sky and the scepter from the hand of the tyrant."

Franklin's unusual appeal to women was likely to play a part in this story. As Lopez observed, "Women, young and old, loved him because he took a keen interest in them, not merely as objects of desire, but as people
with a different outlook, with their own contribution to make. He listened to them, he was not afraid of them. . . .”21 It is of some interest that about five years after meeting Princess Izabella, at the age of seventy-one, he developed an intimate friendship with a young woman, Madame Brillon, who seems to have shared certain personality characteristics with the Polish lady. Like the latter, she was bright and cultivated as well as unhappily married, restless, and egotistic.22 Moreover, Mme. Brillon was also a music lover and suffered from episodes of melancholia and assorted physical symptoms. Curiously, however, when she at one time complained to Franklin about her deep depression and anguish, he tried to ascribe her complaints to physical causes, asked if bloodletting had relieved her, and urged her to exercise by going up and down a flight of stairs every day.23 While that forerunner of jogging seemed to have no appeal for Mme. Brillon, Franklin had little else to offer in the way of emotional support as he himself was in the midst of a severe and protracted attack of gout. Evidently, empathy and even keen therapeutic skills may recede into the background when a therapist is not only personally too involved with his patient but also infirm.

It may seem exaggerated to regard Franklin as a precursor of modern brief psychotherapy on the basis of only one sketchy anecdote. Yet one cannot fail to be impressed by his remarkable display of the very elements of such therapy which are essential to its success. Empathy and warmth, sensitivity and genuine interest, a confident attitude and a touch of suggestion (“Madam, you are cured”), and reinforcement (12 sessions or “Lessons”), are all key ingredients. In addition, Franklin was a famous older man and seemed to have an air of self-confident yet kind authority about him. None of these characteristics was likely to be lost on the perceptive young woman. And there was music. Sigerist, an eminent medical historian, observed that music had been used as a therapeutic agent since Greek antiquity and to some of the ancient writers it appeared as “a kind of psychotherapy that acted on the body through the medium of the mind.”24 In our times, music therapy has been employed as an adjunct to psychotherapy. Kohut has offered some interesting thoughts on the psychological effects of music.25 He points out that it not only gives sensual and esthetic pleasure, but also permits catharsis and “expiation in the area of sounds” which is outside the world of people and conflicts that may give rise to melancholia. The Princess’ tears suggest a catharsis. Her subsequent music lessons allowed her to share in her therapist’s magic and mastery—a heady experience that appeared to strengthen her sense of own worth and her will to live.
The author wishes to thank Dr. Krystyna Dietrich for bringing to his attention the Polish sources quoted here.


3. Debicki, *Pulawy*


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. C. Van Doren, ed., *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiographical Writings* (New York, 1945), 279.


11. Lopez, *Mon Cher Papa*.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Pauszer-Klonowska, *Pani na Pulawach*


18. Pauszer-Klonowska, *Pani na Pulawach*


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.
