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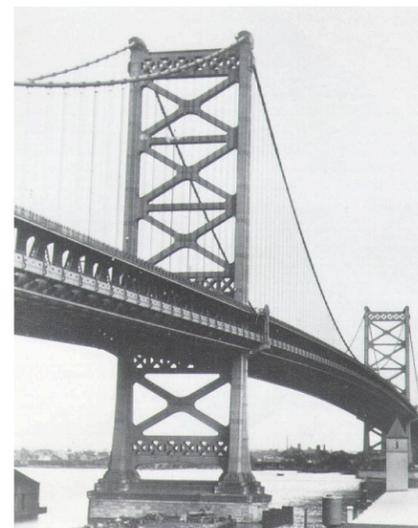
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Ralph Modjeski - The Polish Bridge Builder

by Kaya Mirecka Ploss

In the history of bridges in the United States, Ralph Modjeski's name will always be remembered. He was born Rudolf Modrzejewski in Krakow in the year 1861. Early in his American career, Modrzejewski changed his name to Ralph Modjeski. He found that Americans had great difficulty pronouncing, spelling, or remembering his complex Polish name. His mother, the famous Polish Shakespearean actress Helena Modrzejewska, who brought her family to the United States in 1876, had the same problem. Upon the earnest advice of her friends she changed her name from Helena Modrzejewska to simply Madame Helena Modjeska.



Ralph Modjeski's European education, in addition to languages and mathematics, included musical studies under Kazimierz Hofmann, son of the world-renowned pianist Joseph Hofmann. Curiously, during that same period Modjeski's fellow student was the illustrious Ignacy Jan Paderewski. Ralph Modjeski was an extremely proficient pianist. In seven lessons he had learned four of Kohler's etudes by heart and almost the entire sixth sonata by Mozart. If Ralph Modjeski had chosen a career in music instead of engineering the world might have gained a famous concert pianist, but it would have lost one of its finest bridge designers.

Engineering won out and Modjeski completed his education in his chosen field at the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées in Paris. He graduated in 1885 at the head of his class with a degree in Civil Engineering. With his mother, the famous Helena Modrzejewska, already in America. Ralph returned to the United States and began his engineering career in Chicago where he worked for seven years with one of the leading bridge builders of that time. George S. Morison.

In 1893, Modjeski decided to launch a private practice in the bridge-design field. He obtained his first major project, the design and construction of a seven-span combined railway and highway bridge over the Mississippi River, at Rock Island, Illinois. Later Modjeski developed a set of standard bridge designs for the Northern Pacific Railroad. From this point he progressed rapidly, designing an almost unbelievable number of this country's finest major bridges.

Frank M. Master of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was employed by Modjeski in 1904. Twenty years later Modjeski and Masters formed a partnership. Today, this firm continues to operate from offices in Harrisburg, New Orleans, Chicago, and Washington.

Time does not permit listing the many bridges in which Modjeski and his partners were involved. It is also significant to note that Ralph Modjeski was often called upon as a consultant and adviser. After several disastrous failures in the construction of the world's longest cantilever-truss rail bridge in Quebec, Canada, Ralph Modjeski was called upon and brought the project to a successful conclusion in 1918. Modjeski was also chairman of the board of consulting engineers in charge of the design and construction of the great eight-mile-long Bay Bridge in San Francisco, which was finished in 1937.

In Pennsylvania, Modjeski designed what at that time was the longest suspension bridge in the world, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in Philadelphia, opened on July 1, 1926. Excitement reigned in that city on the day President Calvin Coolidge, assisted by the Army Corps of Engineers, opened the bridge across the Delaware River.

Only a few years later Modjeski designed the unusual tied-arch Tacony Palmyra Bridge further upstream on the Delaware. Some of Pennsylvania's most interesting bridges have been designed by Ralph Modjeski and his partners. Many of these bridges have won national awards for their artistry of design. Graceful lines, arches, and staunch utility have always characterized Modjeski's work. Almost all of the bridges that Modjeski and his partners designed are still in use.

Rudolf Modrzejewski, also known as Ralph Modjeski, was almost eighty years old when he died in 1940. He was one of the many illustrious men who were born in Poland and helped build America.

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