The powerful story of upstander Janusz Korczak is presented here by Adam Yunis.

The Life of Janusz Korczak

Adam Yunis

This was a speech written by Adam Yunis and presented to the Polish American Medical Society by Head of Education at Illinois Holocaust Museum, Kelley Szany, in October 2019.

Janusz Korczak represents all the creativity, talent, empathy and ambition to make the world a better place that was lost in the tragedy of the Holocaust. But Korczak also represents courage, the courage to put others before yourself, the courage to not abandon your beliefs, your friends, your children. Writing in the Warsaw Ghetto, Korczak writes of staking his life on a single card, the care of destitute children. Korczak is known for his actions during this time in the Ghetto, where he heroically cared for the children in his orphanage, but his actions throughout his life display a profound sense of moral duty to help not only individuals, but society. What strikes us most from Kozak's life is an intense belief in humanity and his message that we cannot let our world, our society, fail our children.

Janusz Korczak was born Henryk Goldszmit on July 22nd, 1878 or 1879 to a well off, assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland. Korczak writings tell us of his own shock on learning as a five-year-old that he was a Jew from a janitor's son, who threatened him with a dark place much like Hell if he did not do his bidding. We do not know if his father, Józef, a lawyer, took him to synagogue or had him bar mitzvahed, but he passed on to him the aspirations of his own father, a physician, to liberate the Jews from their segregated lives and propel them into Polish culture. This belief in a strong bond between Jews and Poles, that one could be both Jewish and Polish and not sacrifice either identity would be a driving force in his life. Korczak

states in his memoir “I pursue in life that which my father strove for and for which my grandfather tortured himself for many years. “This belief in one common humanity would be a defining principle in his work as an educator.

When Korczak father died after a long illness in 1896, the family was left without a source of income. Korczak was forced to be the sole breadwinner for his mother, sister, and grandmother. Children became Korczak savior in his youth, just as he would become theirs. He forgot his own anxieties while tutoring pampered, rich boys, much like he had been, in order to help support his family, and in the process developed some of the creative strategies that he would later use in his own orphanages. This close family environment and the death of his father by illness undoubtedly influenced his awareness to the plight of societal problems and his early pursuit of medicine. Korczak studied medicine at the University of Warsaw from 1898-1904. During this time, he began writing professionally, using the name we now know today, Janusz Korczak, a name he chose from one of his favorite Polish novels. Korczak was immediately successful, writing in several newspapers and publishing well received children’s books. In medicine he specialized in pediatrics but immediately after graduating was drafted into the Russian army and was posted in East Asia. Even during those war years, Korczak was always himself, always sensitive to the fate of children. In his memoirs he recalls buying a beating rod off a sadistic Chinese teacher in one of the villages – it would later serve as a skipping rope for children at his Orphans’ Home. He then worked for Bersohns and Baumans Children's Hospital in Warsaw from 1905-1912. During this time, he continued to write children’s books and books for adults on raising their children and became well known in Warsaw society for his successful private practice in medicine and as an influential author.

Both as a doctor and a writer, Korczak was drawn to the world of the child. He worked in a Jewish children's hospital and took groups of children to summer camps, and in 1908 he began to work with orphans. By working with orphans, he met Stefania Wilczynska, a superb educator, and the daughter of a wealthy Jewish family who dedicated her life to the care of orphans and greatly influenced Korczak and his career as an educator. It was the work with orphans and with the help of a great mind as Stefania that led him to open his own orphanage, one where he could implement his own progressive ideas.

In 1912, Korczak and Stefania opened *Dom Sierot* at Krochmalna 92 street, a Jewish orphanage with a hundred boys and girls, ages seven to fourteen. Members of Warsaw society had been amazed that the famous Janusz Korczak would give up his literary career and successful medical practice to take care of poor children. They did not understand that medicine was no longer enough for this visionary pediatrician. "The road I have chosen toward my goal is neither the shortest nor the most convenient," he told an interviewer. "But it is the best for me because it is my own. I found it not without effort or pain." Part of the difficulty in making the decision lay in assuring himself that he was not betraying medicine. He reasoned that medicine is involved only with curing the sick child, but he had a chance to cure the whole child in running an orphanage. As a scientist he could use the orphanage as a laboratory for clinical observation and as an educator, he could be, in his own words, "sculptor of the child's soul." The children's republic he built was designed as a just community where its young citizens would have their own parliament, newspaper, and court of peers.

Korczak was a pioneer in what we now call moral education. Central to his ideas in his orphanage and in his ideas of childhood development was his Declaration of Children's Rights. That children have a right to be loved, respected and given optimal conditions in which to grow.

They have a right to be taken seriously and that children are not people of tomorrow but people of today. Korczak believed that “the unknown person inside each child is the hope for the future.” It was for this reason children could be as religious as they wanted and allowed to pursue creative outlets as they wish.

As a form of tonic, Pan Doctor, as the orphans called him, devised ingenious strategies — his “pedagogical arsenal” — to help his charges strengthen their will. One favorite was the make-believe gambling casino he set up for them to bet on how many fights they would have each week, until they were motivated to have none. However, he considered the children’s court of peers the cornerstone of his system because it would show the children that there could be justice even in an unjust world. Rather than retaliating a child could call out “I sue you,” and sign his or her name on the list of court cases that were heard each Saturday morning. Five children with no cases against them that week were the judges, who followed a Code of Laws that Korczak had drawn up, with forgiveness being the usual resolution to a court case. Behind Korczak creative techniques was a keen psychological understanding of children that came from years of practice, experience that most doctors who worked with adults did not have. Korczak once told a friend “I am a doctor by training, a pedagogue by chance, a writer by passion, and a psychologist by necessity.”

Korczak was also striving to fulfill the goals of his father and grandfather and to reinforce the bridge between Jewish and Catholics. He made Polish the language in his Jewish orphanage, co-directed a second orphanage in Warsaw for poor Catholic children and wrote humorous books on his experiences in both Jewish and Polish summer camps. He learned at camp that all children are alike because they speak the common language of childhood. They laugh at the same things; they feel the same weight of life and they weep at the same things. As Korczak influence grew

he founded the first children's newspaper, The Little Review, and had a radio program as the Old Doctor, whose warmth and wit endeared him to Polish children all over the country. The Little Review was press phenomenon of an unprecedented scale – a paper edited and written by children, which maintained the appearance of a real paper and which was devoid of any paternalistic and moralizing approach typical of publications addressed to children. His last radio broadcast took place in 1939 during the start of the war, when he addressed children to soothe them and prepare them for what was coming.

On September 1st, 1939, Germany invaded Poland after having staged several false flag border incidents as a pretext to initiate the attack. Korczak volunteered for military service but was refused due to his age. Shortly after Warsaw fell to the Germans in 1939, Korczak began a memoir, starting with the line, "Reminiscences make a sad, depressing literature." Certainly, he did not expect at the age of sixty-one to be writing a memoir in occupied Warsaw, in what he called "the hour of reckoning in the saddest hospital in the world."

In early November 1940, one year after the creation of the ghetto, together with Ms. Stefa and his children, Korczak was forced to leave Krochmalna (which now found itself outside of the ghetto) and to transfer into a building of the State Trade School on 33 Chłodna Street. As part of his resistance to the Nazis, Korczak kept the same structure and routine in his ghetto orphanage. Every Saturday morning, the children were weighed, the court or peers met and handed down its verdicts, and he read aloud the orphanage newspaper. He added an underground school in the orphanage, which included Hebrew in the curriculum to prepare those children if there was an opportunity to escape to Palestine. Korczak struggled to keep his spirits up. This educator who

could not bear to see a child suffer from any injustice or an unkind word, who had a taken a vow to uphold the cause of children and to defend their rights, had to pass dead or dying children on the street every day. He records without comment that three boy boys playing on the sidewalk were annoyed that the body of a dead child was in their way. Korczak unsuccessfully pleaded with the *Judenrat* to provide a place where terminally ill children could die with dignity. In the Ghetto, Korczak refused to wear an armband with a star of David. He felt this demeaned the Jewish star to be used in such a way, but this resistance almost cost him his life. During the move to the Ghetto, in 1940, Korczak protested to the Gestapo that these orphanages potatoes had been confiscated during the move. He was thrown into the notorious Pawiak prison for not wearing his armband. He survived only because of one of his former orphans had the contacts and funds to get him out.

During his time in the ghetto, Korczak spent his days caring for his orphans and attempting to raise funds for food and medicine. When he was a child, Korczak father invited in unemployed workers who went from house to house performing a puppet play during Christmastime. After it was over an old man with a bag appeared to take up donations. The boy, "trembling with excitement," would toss his little coins into the sack. The old man would peer inside, shake his long white beard, and say: "Very little, very little, young gentleman, a bit more." The old man with the sack had taught Korczak a great deal: He writes in the ghetto that "The hopelessness of defense against persistent requests and unbounded demands that are impossible to meet. At first, you give eagerly, then less enthusiastically, from a sense of duty, then, following the laws of inertia, from habit and without heart, and then resentfully, angrily, with despair." Each morning in the ghetto he got up, slung a sack over his aching shoulder, and went out to makes his rounds of wealthy contacts and social service agencies to plead, then

demand, money and food for his two hundred children. He was as relentless as the old man: no matter what they gave, it was never enough.

Korczak took a break from writing in his memoir until May of 1942, nearly a two-year break. We can surmise that he started writing again because of the increasing violence of Nazi death squads and rumors of impending mass deportations. For the first two weeks in July, when smugglers of food and supplies were being slaughtered, Korczak, the writer, emerges imagining a planet called Ro. The astronomer who lives on it, Professor Zi, can convert heat radiation into moral power and can bestow order and tranquility everywhere except on "that restless spark, Planet Earth." Looking down on the wars of the planet, Professor Zi wonders if he should simply put an end to this senseless, bloody game. But with the compassion of the Old Doctor, he concludes: "Planet Earth is still young. And a beginning is painful labor." Professor Zi has all-encompassing power on Planet Ro, but Janusz Korczak has no control down in the smoldering ghetto, except in his children's republic. Still the inventive pedagogue, he makes a game out of catching the flies that swarm over the toilet buckets. He writes of the thrill he received when one of the boys asks: "May I pay the flies later? I can't wait," and another offers to catch his flies for him. "Community good will, what a mighty force," Korczak writes.

Rumors, impossible to verify, continued to spread through the ghetto that Jews were being gassed in other cities and that railroad cars were waiting to deport everyone from the Warsaw ghetto. Korczak Polish disciples on the Aryan side also heard the rumors, and sent Igor Newerly, his former secretary, into the ghetto disguised as a water and sewer inspector with a false identity card to bring Korczak out. According to Newerly, Korczak refused to abandon the children at such a perilous time. He did, however, promise to send Newerly the diary he was working on for safekeeping.

In the ghetto Korczak attempted to keep kids occupied and thought that they might enjoy acting in a play The Post Office, written by the Indian writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, whose empathy for children was much like his own. The production, which took place on July 18 — four days before deportations were announced and three weeks before the young actors would march to their deaths — has become legendary. In the play, Amal, a gentle and imaginative orphan adopted by a poor couple, is confined to his room with a serious illness, shut in from the outside world, like everyone in the ghetto, awaiting an uncertain future. He longs to fly to that land to which the King's doctor, greater than the one he has now, will lead him by the hand. The invited guests gasp along with Amal when the royal doctor suddenly appears and orders all the doors and windows to be opened. Amal's pain is gone, and he can see the stars twinkling on the other side of the darkness. Asked why he chose that play, Korczak is reported to have said that he wanted to help the children face death without fear. But in his diary, he makes only a short notation about the afternoon: "Applause, handshakes, smiles, efforts at cordial conversation."

July 22 was Korczak sixty-fourth birthday. It was also the day the Gestapo informed the ghetto that there would be deportations. By 4 PM that afternoon, six thousand people were to be at the *Umschlagplatz*, a large loading area just north of the ghetto, where freight trains were waiting to take them to "Resettlement in the East." Korczak surely stood in the hysterical crowds looking at the notices posted on the ghetto walls, but rather than accept his inability to alter the surreal events of that day, he did battle where he could.

In the final entry of August 5 or August 6, Korczak is watering the "poor orphanage plants," which had been smuggled into the ghetto by his Polish friends. He muses about the young German soldier standing with his rifle by the ghetto wall across the street. The soldier was

not shooting at him, even though his “bald head in the window” would make a “splendid target.” Korczak tries to see him as a young man with an identity other than a killer with a gun. “Perhaps he was a village teacher, a street sweeper in Leipzig, a waiter in Cologne.” He considers waving his hand in a friendly gesture. He writes what will be the final words of his ghetto diary: “Perhaps he doesn’t even know that things are as they are? He may have arrived only yesterday from far away...” We see that to his last day in the ghetto Korczak tries to hold on to his humanity.

On Thursday, August 6, 1942, he and the children were sitting down to their meager breakfast when they heard the dread call: “All Jews out.” We can be certain that Korczak tried to reassure the children as they lined up fearfully, clutching their little flasks of water, their few possessions, their diaries. No one had yet escaped from Treblinka to reveal the truth: they were not going East, but sixty miles northeast of Warsaw to immediate extermination in gas chambers. We know from survivors who watched from behind closed shutters, and from Gestapo records, that Korczak, hatless, in high military boots, holding two young children by the hand, was at the head of the orderly procession of 192 children and 10 staff members, including the loyal Stefa, who had also turned down offers to escape. They marched four abreast in the broiling heat, holding high the flag of King Matt, green on one side, with the blue Star of David set against a field of white on the other, escorted by soldiers, whips, and dogs. Wladyslaw Szpilman in his memoir, The Pianist says of the scene “He told the orphans they were going out into the country, so they ought to be cheerful. At last, they would be able to exchange the horrible suffocating city walls for meadows of flowers, streams where they could bathe, woods full of berries and mushrooms. He told them to wear their best clothes, and so they came out into the yard, two by two, nicely dressed and in a happy mood. “

We learn from the memoir of Nahum Remba, a *Judenrat* [Jewish council] official who ran a small first aid station on the *Umschlagplatz,* that 4,000 orphans, with their caretakers, went on the transports with Korczak and the children that day. He tried to persuade Korczak to go with him to ask the Judenrat to intercede, but Korczak would not consider leaving the children even for a moment in this terrifying place. Remba states "I shall never forget this scene as long as I live," Remba wrote. "This was no march to the trains, but rather a mute protest, with eyes full of contempt for this murderous regime." The Jewish police jumped to attention and saluted when they saw Korczak helping the children into the crowded freight cars. The Germans asked: "Who is that man?" The doors closed. There were no survivors.

Outside the ghetto a red-haired boy appeared at his door with a package for Igor Newerly. Newerly realized that Korczak had kept his promise to send him the diary. He took it immediately to Korczak Polish orphanage and helped the caretaker brick it up under the eaves. After the war, when Poland was part of the Soviet bloc, Newerly, who had survived two years in Auschwitz (where he thought he spotted the red-haired boy), was able to retrieve the diary from its hiding place.

Only one rock is engraved: "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the children." At Treblinka today. Over the years, the Korczak legend has gathered momentum in Europe as poets and playwrights continue to recreate his march with the children to the trains. Korczak societies have sprung up in many countries and hold international conferences to spread his educational ideas and to advocate for the welfare of children. The Poles claim Korczak as a martyr, who would have been canonized if he had converted; the Israelis claim him as one of the Thirty-Six Just Men, whose pure souls make possible the world's salvation. UNESCO declared 1978-79 the Year of Janusz Korczak, to coincide with the Year of the Child and the centenary of his birth. In

1971, the Russians discovered a new asteroid and named it 2163 Korczak. Now the Old Doctor really does have a planet very much like Planet Ro from which to control the moral forces in the universe and to put into effect his Declaration of Children's Rights. Janusz Korczak often said life is a strange dream, I ask you today to remember him not for how he died, but for the values he lived his life.

Further Resources:

Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum

The Warsaw Ghetto : Memoirs of Janusz Korcza

References

Korczak, Janusz and E P Kulawiec. *The Warsaw Ghetto : Memoirs of Janusz Korczak [I.e. H. Goldszmit]*. Washington: University Press Of America, 1978.

Korczak, Janusz and Rada Europy. *Janusz Korczak : The Child's Right to Respect : Janusz Korczak's Legacy, Lectures on Today's Challenges for Children.* Strasboug: Council Of Europe, Cop, 2009.

"The Last Korczak Boy." www.youtube.com, 2006. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq_WUJ5oWjo.

Yad Vashem. "Janusz Korczak | Www.yadvashem.org." Yadvashem.org, 2019. https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/learning-environment/janusz-korczak/korczak-bio.html.