

Testament of an Extraordinary Educator

The memoirs of Janusz Korczak provide a rare view of life in a Warsaw ghetto orphanage and a poignant glimpse into the mind of a great physician, educator, and advocate of children.

Among the freedom fighters, poets, leaders, and heroes who endured the Nazi occupation of Poland in World War II, one of the more remarkable figures is Janusz Korczak, born Henryk Goldszmit in 1878, a Jewish Pole whose life has become one of humankind's brightest and most inspiring examples of self-sacrifice and commitment, honor, and trust.

During his lifetime (1878–1942) Korczak attained a large measure of recognition. He was a successful and highly popular writer of children's fiction, a respected author of educational studies, a pediatrician, radio commentator, lecturer, publicist, and a profound thinker-philosopher with prophetic insight. He also served as an army medical officer in three revolutions and four wars. His most significant achievement, however, was the founding of a unique and progressive method of raising children. As a champion of children's rights, Korczak believed that the only way to reform humanity lay in reforming the method of bringing up children. Bruno Bettelheim wrote of him: "It is the profound respect for the child exhibited by Korczak, even more than his absolute love, that makes him one of the greatest educators of all times."¹

Korczak was able to put his philosophy to practical use in the orphanage he directed in Warsaw. It was to this "children's republic" that European doctors and educators flocked to observe and study firsthand Korczak's methods, which were to become, half a century later, the basis for similar efforts that recognized the rights of youngsters to respect and independence.

Although Korczak wrote some 20 books between 1920 and 1942, the most moving of his works is a journal written in the Warsaw Ghetto between May and August 1942. This modestly sized, typewritten manuscript was discovered in May 1947 in a metal box concealed in a wall of the Warsaw orphanage. Simply titled *Memoirs*, the diary is an engrossing account of Korczak's last months.

In 1940 Korczak's beloved orphanage was forced to relocate within the Warsaw Ghetto, a square mile of land located in the center of the city, surrounded by a nine-foot high brick wall that detained nearly a million people. For the next year and a half, the man familiarly known as "Mr. Doctor" or "The Old Doctor"—in his early 60s and in ill health—carried on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour struggle to maintain his orphanage in a semblance of order

and peace. Of the ghetto conditions Korczak noted, "The appearance of the district changes from day to day. A prison, a plagued spot, a threshing floor, insane asylum, a casino. Monaco. The bet—one's head!"²

It took an iron will and steadfast energy to keep his 200 orphans fed, housed, and clothed; to provide them with warmth, schooling, and diversions; to give them love, courage, and hope. The ghetto, indeed, was a "plagued spot," with disease, hunger, overcrowding, violence, and a soaring death rate. The cleanup brigade could not keep up with the mounting number of corpses; here, life and death became blurred. A street scene described by Korczak bears witness: "A young boy was lying on the ground near the sidewalk, still alive, or maybe already dead. In the same place three boys are playing at horses and wagons and their ropes get tangled up. They confer with each other, try this way and that to get the reins untangled. They grow impatient and kick the lying boy. Finally, one of the boys says: 'Let's move on, he's in our way.'"³

Korczak started writing his memoirs at the insistence of friends. He tried a number of times before to write his autobiography, but these attempts produced little. "No surprise that memoirs are incomprehensible to the reader," he wrote, as if justifying this neglect. "Can one understand another's recollections, life? It seems to me that I ought to know without any difficulty what I am writing about. Bah! Is it possible to understand even one's own recollections?"⁴

But he did, finally, try again—maybe from sheer desperation, maybe because of a presentiment that the end



Janusz Korczak is shown here in his last photograph taken in September 1940.

Photograph courtesy of Korczak Archives, Warsaw

was in sight. "I don't know why I'm keeping a journal," he wrote in a letter to a friend. "It's not so much an attempt at synthesizing as it is a crypt of trials, discoveries, and errors. Maybe it will be of some use to someone, sometime, in fifty years or so...."⁵

He did all his writing in the so-called isolation ward of the orphanage. Surrounded on all sides by sleeping children, he wrote late at night or in the early hours of the morning, and always exhausted, for he spent much of each day trudging from one end of the ghetto to the other to secure help for his children, begging for food, fuel, medicine, and clothing. "I returned," he noted one night, "utterly shattered from my 'rounds.' Seven calls, conversations, climbing of stairs, questions. The net result: fifty zlotys and a promise of five zlotys a month. And with this one is supposed to support two hundreded people!"⁶

In these hours, as the children slept, Korczak snatched at whatever sanity his isolated thoughts and musings could bring. It is clear from the contents that the memoirs were written in great haste, feverishly, without thought or regard for style or polish. Whatever caught his fancy, he jotted down. Amid notes about his children and accounts of daily tribulations were random reflections on history, science, philosophy, religion, and fiction.

Two months before the end, he noted:

The day began with the weighing of the children. The month of May showed a marked decline. The earlier months of this year were not too bad, and even May isn't yet all that alarming. But we still have two months or more before the harvest. This is certain. And the restrictions imposed by official regulations and interpretations ought to make the situation still worse.... The children are dreamy. Only their outer skin looks normal. Underneath lurks fatigue, discouragement, anger, mutiny, mistrust, resentment, longing. The seriousness of their diaries hurts. In response to their confidences I share with them as an equal. Our common experiences—theirs and mine. Only mine are more diluted, watered down, otherwise they are the same.⁷

As the conditions in the ghetto grew steadily worse, the jottings grew more and more tense, almost cryptic. Never does Korczak speak about bitterness, hatred, or revenge toward his oppressors. "I don't wish anyone any harm," he wrote in the last summer of his life.

"I don't know how. I just don't know how this is done."⁸

He struggled for two years in the ghetto orphanage over what had been his lifelong labor—to secure for his orphans a measure of happiness and self-respect, a feeling that someone cared for them. His orphanage was an oasis of peace, love, and order. But it was short-lived. On August 5, 1942, the Germans put their master plan for Poland and its Jews into action. Korczak, the 200 children, and the personnel of the orphanage were shipped en masse aboard cattle trains to the dreaded Nazi extermination camp in Treblinka. There all trace of them vanished in smoke. Korczak's last entry in his memoirs reads: "I am watering my flowers. My bald head is at the window. What a good target it is. He has a gun. Why is he standing and looking on so calmly, I wonder? He's not under any orders. And maybe as a civilian he was a village schoolteacher, or a public notary, or a street-cleaner in Leipzig, or a waiter in Cologne. I wonder what he would do if I nodded to him, or waved my hand at him in a friendly way? Maybe he doesn't even know that things are as they are here. He may have arrived only yesterday from afar...."⁹

The memoirs are more poignant when one learns that Korczak turned down many offers of personal rescue brought to him by friends on the outside. Those offers could not include his orphan children. Igor Newerly, one of the last persons to bring Korczak a plan for escape, recalls the old doctor's rebuff: "He was surprised I didn't see how odious the proposal was. 'One doesn't leave one's child in sickness, in ill-fortune or danger,' Korczak remarked. 'And there are 200 children here! How could I leave them alone in a sealed railway train and in the gas chamber? Could one live it down afterwards?' It was as if Korczak were repeating something he wrote in his memoirs not long before this last encounter with his old friend and colleague: "Long after the war," Korczak wrote, "men will not be able to look each other in the eyes without reading the question: 'You're alive? You survived? What were you doing?'"¹⁰

Ironically, what Korczak was doing in the summer of 1942 was foreshad-

owed in an article he wrote in 1937 entitled "On Helping Children":

It is a beautiful word, the Polish, "wychowac"—to rear, bring up. Not the German, "erziehen"—to pull, to tow, draw out. To bring up means to preserve, defend, shield—to protect from the cold, from abuse, suffering. Imperilled by invasions and partitions, Poland brought up its children in order to transmit to them from one generation to the next new times, new modes of life. This process goes on.¹¹

Between 1939 and 1942, Korczak was to live the meaning of *wychowac* in its fullest sense. His last will, his memoirs, are an expression of one who had glimpsed the truth and knew what had to be done. Some call this devotion; others commitment; still others, honesty of conviction. It is all this and more. Forty years after his death (the anniversary of which was observed in August 1982) Korczak continues to attract, intrigue, excite, impress, and inspire. He has something to tell us about commitment, something we can still learn from and use. "I exist not to be loved and admired, but to love and act," he wrote shortly before the final ride to Treblinka. "It is not the duty of those around me to love me. Rather, it is my duty to be concerned about the world, about man."¹² □

1. Bruno Bettelheim, "Preface," in Janusz Korczak, *Comment Aimer Un Enfant*, trans. Zofia Bobowicz (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1978), p. 7.

2. Janusz Korczak, *The Warsaw Ghetto Memoirs of Janusz Korczak*, trans. E. P. Kulawiec (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978).

3. Korczak, op. cit.

4. Korczak, op. cit.

5. Korczak, op. cit.

6. Korczak, op. cit.

7. Korczak, op. cit.

8. Korczak, op. cit.

9. Korczak, op. cit.

10. Igor Newerly, "Introduction," in *Selected Works of Janusz Korczak* (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1967), p. xiii.

11. Maria Falkowska, Maria Bronikowska, and Alexander Lewin, *Chronology of the Life, Activities, and Works of Janusz Korczak*, trans. E. P. Kulawiec (New York: The Kosciuszko Foundation, 1980), p. 41.

12. Korczak, op. cit.

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