In the Shadow of Janusz Korczak—
The Story of Stefania Wilczynska

By Philip E. Veerman

At Yad Vashem, the Jewish people's national Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, there is an impressive monument by the sculptor Berich Sakstier, portraying the Polish-Jewish educator Janusz Korczak and a group of children. Korczak's last walk with the children to the Umschlagplatz, the Warsaw place of assembly for deportations, is well known. Less known is the fact that Korczak and the children went to Treblinka together with Stefania Wilczynska, who for 30 years was the manager and backbone of the famous orphanage. Janusz Korczak (pen name of Dr. Henryk Goldszmit) was a highly creative writer with revolutionary ideas about the rights of the child. He was also a famous pediatrician. But he was not much of an organizer. Without Stefania Wilczynska he could never have been able to put his theories into practice.

In December 1907 the Russian authorities in Warsaw agreed to the articles of incorporation of a new organization for Jewish children: "The Association for the Help of Orphans." In the annual report of the Association three years later we read that "in 1910 a new period started in the history of the Association. What was only a dream, will soon be a reality: a Home for the Orphans." A group of Jewish philanthropists raised the 118,000 rubles necessary to build a modern Children's Home on Krochmalna-street. That same year of 1910 was also a turning point for the organization in another way. Dr. Henryk Goldszmit (Janusz Korczak) and Stefania Wilczynska joined the enterprise. The chairman of the building commission, Dr. Ellinberg, persuaded his colleagues Dr. Goldszmit to join. Dr. Goldszmit was already a well-known pediatrician and author who had written short stories such as "Saloen Children and Street Children" under the pen name "Janusz Korczak." He had also worked in summer camps for Jewish and Christian children.

A Talent for Organization

Stefania Wilczynska's wealthy parents had sent their daughter to Liège in Belgium (where she studied natural sciences between 1906 and 1908) and Switzerland. In the archives of the University of Geneva I found that she was registered as auditor at the faculty of sciences for the summer of 1906. Though it was not at all necessary for someone with her family wealth and educational background to work in a Children's Home, Stefania Wilczynska chose a working life in the orphanage.

Stefia's parents lived not far from a small orphanage of the Association in Frankfurter-kasinstreet. She decided that with her great talents for organization she could contribute greatly to the poor orphanage program. When the new orphanage in Krochmalna-street was opened, Stefania Wilczynska became its manager and Dr. Goldszmit gave up his practice to become the director. Setting aside their private lives, Korczak and Stefia both chose to dedicate all their efforts to the children. They went as far as moving in with them. Korczak had his room between the boys' and the girls' dormitories, and Stefia's was on the far side of the girls' dormitory. The relationship between the director and the manager of "Dom Sierot" (House of Orphans) remained quite formal; they addressed each other as "Doktor" and "Mrs. Stefia." Yet it had some elements of a husband-wife relationship. They shared the care for the children while Stefia also took care of Korczak's personal things, such as buying him his clothes. In fact, she mothered the absent-minded writer in many ways.

A book published in Warsaw in 1979, Lea Morano remembers Korczak hurriedly heading for the door to go to a meeting and Stefia running from the other side of the big dining room shouting, "Pan Doktor, Pan Doktor" (Mr. Doktor, Mr. Doktor). When Stefia finally caught him, he stopped impatiently. Then she asked, "Did you take your handkerchief?" Korczak felt for it in his pockets, admitting he had none. Pani Stefia then gave him one while he continued on his way. Shaking her head, Stefia then summed, "Just like a small child, forgetting his handkerchief, despite his bad cold."

In 1914 World War I tore Korczak away from the children and from his writings, and took him as far as Kiev. Stefania Wilczynska ran the House alone. In 1927 Stefia wrote a letter to a friend who worked in a Children's Home in Bialystok:

I would have regretted it if you had decided to stop working in the Children's Home in Bialystok.

Philip Veerman writes: "A former pupil of Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczynska gave me this photograph of Mrs. Stefia... this picture shows how many former pupils remember her... simply ever smiling and working hard."
The Melton Journal has been out of circulation for a bit over two years. These have been busy two years, full of gains and even some losses. Professor Joseph Schwab, a distinguished member of the Academic Board, died during this period, after a long bout with emphysema. It is difficult to exaggerate the tremendous role that Professor Schwab played in the early development of the Melton Center. An educator with national prestige brought to the Semi- nary by Professor Seyfer Fox, Professor Schwab was a man of imagination and intellectual courage, an originator in the best sense of the word, in love with the crafts of learning and teaching. For the Center it was always a high honor to have him among its colleagues and collaborators.

* On a truly happy note, during this same period Ruth Zaidenberg, a veteran curriculum writer and teacher educator affiliated with the Center, obtained her doctorate in Jewish education. The theme of her dissertation is the history of the Melton Bible program.

* Other talented educators came and went during this period. Particularly C. Hare brilliantly directed the Melton Retreat Program for two years until we were obliged to sus- pend the program when the Ralph Lauren Foundation three-year grant came to an end. Ms. Hare is presently employed by NYANA, a New York agency associated with the Melton Community of New Immigrants to the United States.

Mimi Cohen, who worked as an education consultant for Melton for almost eight years and also taught technique and supervision courses at JITs, accepted a position as Associate Principal at Solomon Schechter School in White Plains, N.Y., where she is the curriculum coordinator. She continues teaching supervision at JITs, in her absence and in her presence in many areas of our work.

Lori Forman spent a year at the Center performing many educational functions ranging from teacher education to curriculum writing, to the planning and development of new programs. She is presently a rabbi at the Cross Jewish Center in Cartoon-on-the-Hudson, N.Y. and principal of the West Side Jewish Community School in New York City. She continues to consult for the Center.

Earlier this academic year Michael Poh- nick, a veteran collaborator to the Teacher Retreat Program, joined the staff on a half- time basis to run the revived Retreat Program and to help out with this Journal. Earli- er in 1989 Chassidish Rabbi Scharf gave us the wonderful news that Mr. Mac Scharf had made a generous contribution to us that we work on together on the Retreat idea. Presently a number of retreats have taken place, some are planned and others are in the gestation period.

Mrs. Sylvia C. Eitenberg, Dean of Educa- tional Development and supervisor of the Melton Center, retired with the end of the 1989 academic year. Mrs. Eitenberg's serv- ices to the Jewish educational community cannot be measured by any objective terms. Very simply, she has been a central moving force in the totality of the Jewish educational enterprise for over three generations. Camp Ramah and the Melton Center cannot be envisaged without her most central of roles, but many other projects such as Prozorok, The Teacher Training Institute, the Rabbinical Principals' Program, the JEA, and the graduate programs in education at JITs owe much to her efforts and imagination. Mrs. Eitenberg continues to work on other education research projects and we wish her well in all her future pursuits.

Barry W. Holtz, co-director of the Melton Center, spent the 1988-89 academic year on a sabbatical in Jerusalem where he taught in the Hebrew University and worked on the manuscript of a book. The product of his labors will appear next fall under the title Finding a Way—Jewish Texts in Our Lives We Live Today. Barry and his wife Bethannie Horowitz became parents to Sarah in August of last year after their return from Jerusalem, Mazzal Tov!

Ruth Mandell, administrative secretary at the Center for close to two decades retired in the summer of 1988. A friend to all, con- fident and mother spirit, Ruth is sorely missed. She reports having a wonderful time visiting with her daughters and grandchild- ren. Yael Schanzer joined the staff of the Center in the summer of 1988 as an adminis- trative assistant and is in charge of account- ing for the book sales operation.

* Projects in progress (among others): Together—A Child-Friend Kit, Part II, is close to being published. An Inquiry into Bereishit has made substantial progress this year. Vol. V. of the Hebrew Language Program has been almost completed.

The Bet level of the Holidays/Mitzvot/Prayer curriculum materials has been redesigned and will appear in a new edition. A Hebrew song book is being prepared for publication. The delayed Teaching Genesis, a new edition, is close to being published. Instruction in the Tefillot/Prayer programs is being prepared for publica- tion. The Bureau of Jewish Education of Rhodes Island and in conjunction with the Center has developed an educational cable program for the local market based on lessons of the

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certainly inspired the twenty students who, in exchange for free room and board, worked four hours a day for the Center. The Educational Committee was inaugurated as a result of the Committee's designation of those students who were interested in the educational work. The Committee consisted of eleven students, their designee, and a teacher. The students were selected by the educational committee and they had to have been selected by the teacher. The teacher could not choose them.

The students were responsible for planning and organizing all the educational activities. They were responsible for preparing the materials, the teachers, and the study groups. The students also had to prepare the meals for the students. The students were also responsible for maintaining discipline and for keeping the classrooms clean. The students had to do all the work.

During Stefania's stay in Ein Harod she con- sidered the student's community. She had a lot of fun in Ein Harod, she met a lot of people, but on April 31, 1939, she wrote to Jakov and Jankut Kulauskas (both of whom had worked in Dom), and her stay in Ein Harod was not what she had expected. She was not happy.

The German army invaded Poland on January 15, 1940. Stefania sent a letter to Ein Harod through her brother Jakov and requested to be allowed to stay in Ein Harod and continue her studies. She did not want to see other children in Ein Harod, because the day after tomorrow, the second of May, 1939, she left on a Russian evacuee train and she was to make plans for the future. She is very happy with the plans she made.

On the morning of September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland. On February 15, 1940, Stefania sent a letter to Ein Harod through her brother. She was very happy with the plans she made. She was allowed to stay in Ein Harod, and she continued her studies.

During the German invasion, Stefania was very happy. She worked in the orphanage, but Korczak does very much more. I did not come because I cannot have come without the children. Yours, Stefania.

Perhaps afraid that the first letter did not arrive, she wrote again through the Red Cross on April 8, 1940: "We work in the orphanage. Without the children I could not come and I cannot come because I do not want to see other children in Ein Harod. I am very happy with the plans we made. I am very happy with the plans for the future. I do know not what plans to make."

The German army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Stefania Wilczynska was living in Ein Harod, a children's home in the town of Elat, in the western part of the Holy Land. She was a student at the Melton Center in Ein Harod, which was established in 1934 and 1935. Korczak also visited Ein Harod and his former pupil in Ein Harod in 1934 and 1935.