

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 Baruch Saksier, 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 chil-

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Philip Veerman writes: "A former pupil of Janusz Korczak and Stefania Wilczynska gave me this photograph of 'Mrs. Stefa,'... this picture shows how many former pupils remember her... hardly ever smiling and working hard."

dren, "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 roubles 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. Eliasberg, persuaded his colleague Dr. Goldszmit to join. Dr. Goldszmit was already a well-known pediatrician and author who had written short stories such as *Salon 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,



Amongst the children, from left to right: Dr. Eliasberg, chairman of the board of the Association for the Care of Orphans, Dr. H. Goldszmit (pen name, Janusz Korczak), and Stefania Wilczynska, manager of the orphanage. Photo provided by Kibbutz Lohamei Hagbataot, Israel, courtesy of Philip Veerman.

Stefania Wilczynska chose a working life in the orphanage.

Stefa's parents lived not far from a small orphanage of the Association in Francisz-kanskastreet. She decided that with her great talents for organization she could contribute greatly to the poorly run 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 Stefa 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 Stefa'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. Stefa." Yet it had some elements of a husband-wife relationship. They shared the care for the children while Stefa 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.

In a book published in Warsaw in 1979, Ida Merzan remembers Korczak hurriedly heading for the door to go to a meeting and Stefa running from the other side of the big dining room shouting, "Pan Doktor, Pan Doktor" (Mr. Doktor, Mr. Doktor). When Stefa 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 Stefa then gave him one while he continued on his way. Shaking her head, Stefa then murmured, "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 Home alone. In 1927 Stefa 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. That would have

looked as though you had betrayed the children. You can show them that their life can be better organized, but this is difficult. Think how the children feel; everybody has left them alone. I know how you feel. It was so terribly lonely when Dr. Goldszmit had to go to war in 1914. My circumstances were better than yours, because Korczak had already created in the House a valuable educational system. But because of that I had an enormous responsibility. God helped and this valuable education system was not destroyed.

Self-Government in the Orphanage

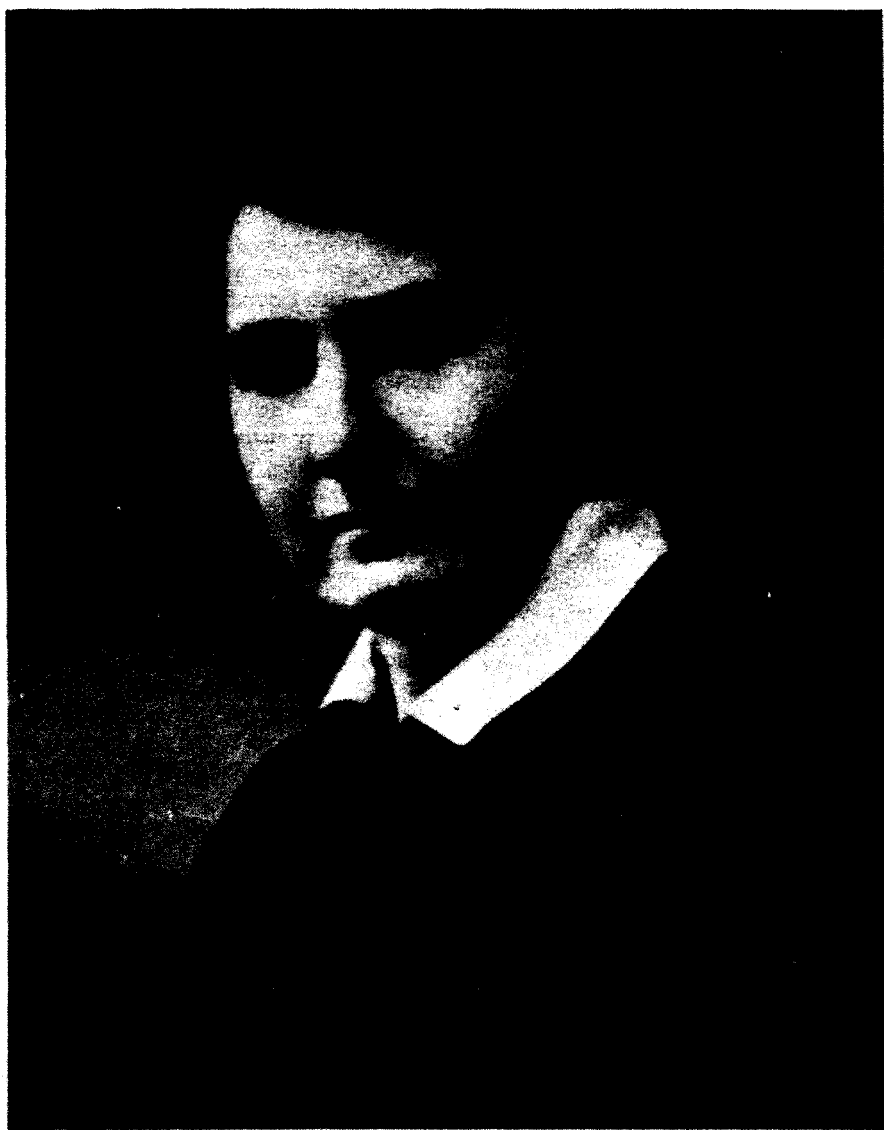
In June 1918 Janusz Korczak returned to a newly independent Poland, bringing with him the manuscript of his major work on pedagogy, *How to Love a Child*. The system of self-government in the orphanage could now be perfected. In a time when methods in many children's homes could be characterized as authoritarian and where warm relationships between pupils and educators were unthinkable, Korczak wrote about the "despotism of educators." He thought a great deal about how to prevent adults in his home from working in ways that would emphasize their authority and possibly be unjust to the vulnerable. He designed a written "codex" and a court for the orphanage. In Dom Sierot adults and children were equal before the court. Five children and a secretary (Stefa) held weekly court sessions.

The children felt more free in Korczak's presence than with Stefa. But Stefa's role was to demand things of children and personnel so that Korczak could be the one who gave warmth and joy. Stefa, on the other hand, was always very serious and did not smile often.

According to a former pupil, Ignacy Cukierman (now living in Canada), the Doktor took part in the games of the children, something that Stefa never did. Children climbed on the Doktor or sat on his lap. He often looked like "a tree with many small birds on it."

Korczak was a charismatic educator. He

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Around the Center

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 our 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 creation and development of the Melton Center. An educator with national prestige brought to the Seminary by Professor Seymour 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 collaborators.

■ On a truly happy note, during this same period Ruth Zielenziger, 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. Patricia C. Harte brilliantly directed the Melton Retreat Program for two years until we were obliged to suspend the program when the Ralph Lauren Foundation three-year grant came to an end. Ms. Harte is presently employed by NYANA, a New York agency assisting in the relocation of new immigrants to the United States.

Mimi Cohen, who worked as an educational consultant at Melton for almost eight years and also taught teaching techniques and supervision courses at JTS, accepted employment at the Solomon Schechter School in White Plains, N.Y. where she is the curriculum coordinator. She continues teaching supervision at JTS. We miss her presence in many areas of our work. Rabbi

Lori Forman spent a year at the Center performing many educational functions from teacher education to curriculum writing, to the planning and development of new programs. She is presently a rabbi at the Croton Jewish Center in Croton-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 Posnick, 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*. Earlier in 1989 Chancellor Ismar Schorsch gave us the wonderful news that Mr. Mac Schwebel had made a generous contribution to permit us to work again on the Retreat idea. Presently a number of retreats have taken place, some are planned and others are in their gestation period.

Mrs. Sylvia C. Ettenberg, Dean of Educational Development and supervisor of the Melton Center, retired with the end of the 1989 academic year. Mrs. Ettenberg's services 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 Prozdor, The Teachers' Institute, the Day School Principals' Program, the JEA, and the graduate program in education at JTS owe much to her efforts and imagination. Mrs. Ettenberg 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 1988-1989 academic year on a sabbatical in Jerusalem where he taught at the Hebrew University and worked on the manuscript of a book. The product of his



The Melton Center celebrates Rashi's 950th birthday with an exhibit of its 5750/1990 poster-calendar and its Rashi T-shirt in one of the display cases in the lobby of the Schiff building, at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. This display was conceived by Bracha Werber and Nina Gaelen and designed by Nina Gaelen. For information on how to obtain the T-shirt and/or the calendar, please contact the Melton office. Photograph by I.E.R.S.

labors will appear next fall under the title *Finding Our Way—Jewish Texts and the Lives We Live Today*. Barry and his wife Bethamie Horowitz became parents to Sophia in August of last year, after their return from Jerusalem. Mazal Tov!

Ruth Mandel, administrative secretary at the Center for close to two decades retired in the summer of 1988. A friend to all, confidant and mother spirit, Ruth is sorely missed. She reports having a wonderful time visiting with her daughters and grandchildren. Yael Schroeder joined the staff of the Center in the summer of 1988 as an administrative assistant and is in charge of accounting for the book sales operation.

■ **Projects in progress** (among many others): *Together—A Child-Parent Kit*, Part II, is close to being published. *An Inquiry into Bereshit* has made substantial progress this year. Vol. V. of the Hebrew Language Program has been mainly completed. The Bet level of the *Holidays/Mitzvot/Prayer* curriculum materials has been reedited 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 publication. The Dalet level of the *Prayer* program is being prepared for publication. The Bureau of Jewish Education of Rhode Island in conjunction with the Center has developed an educational cable program for the local market based on lessons of the

Genesis curriculum. Marcia Kaunfer from the Melton staff was the teacher in this series, accompanied by a talented and attractive group of local Jewish kids. The Melton staff has been involved in an experimental project with the Solomon Schechter Day School in Queens regarding revisions in their Hebrew and Biblical language programs.

The Retreat Program staff is working closely with the Solomon Schechter Day School in White Plains, N.Y., on new approaches toward staff growth and development. Members of the Melton staff and a number of consultants have been involved in developing approaches for a *Parashat Hashavua* program to be used in Day Schools and other settings. Rabbi Ben Scolnic, a teacher at JTS and pulpit rabbi, has joined this group as a valued aide. This summer Melton and Haddasah will run their third consecutive leadership development workshop for women lay leaders involved in educational work in their communities. The Melton Library has continued to build itself up into a solid, ample and eclectic collector of books, journals and curriculum materials, which make it a valued addition to Jewish education libraries throughout the country. Melton fellows and the Center leadership have constituted themselves into a study group exploring relevant topics in depth. This year this continuing enterprise was joined by the Day School fellows. ■

Story of Stefania Wilczynska

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certainly inspired the twenty students who, in exchange for free room and board, worked four hours a day with the children. The idea of educating educators was introduced into the Home in 1920. The students (so-called *bourgists*) had their quarters on the first floor of Dom Sierot. Every evening they recorded their observations. Stefa would add her comments in red ink. These observations would be discussed with Korczak and the *bourgists* once a week. A former *bourgist* remembers that once Korczak chose as the topic for a pedagogical meeting "to whom do the ears of Icek belong?" The people working in Korczak's Children's Home had a kind of "parental responsibility" to see to it that children went prepared into the community, but Icek had come home from school one day with a letter from the teacher complaining that he had dirty ears. This incident must have been an exception, because Stefa was very careful to ensure that the children went to school with clean clothes and polished shoes. Dressed in an old coat, Korczak himself sometimes cleaned tables and polished shoes in the basement. He wanted to demonstrate how to do these things properly. Some visitors, who never had met Korczak before, thought that the old man polishing shoes was the janitor.

Stefa's "Swiss Watch"

Stefa was careful to keep the house spotlessly clean. All children also had duties and helped with the cleaning, the washing and the preparing of food. For this work the children received "work credits." A postcard (a so-called commemorative card) could be

earned with the work credits. Some children were responsible for cleanliness in the dining hall. Other children would be in charge of waking up everybody. A former pupil, now living in Israel, describes the home as "place so organized, it ran like a Swiss watch." Another related that during World War II, when she was living in Siberia and on cold nights had to use the lavatory outside the house, she often dreamt of the clean bathrooms of Dom Sierot. Whereas Stefa was alert to see that everything functioned well, Korczak would sometimes break the rules by making jokes or behaving like a naughty boy.

Pani Stefa had excellent assets for running a home with a hundred children and very little personnel, but she also had her weak points. She especially liked children who looked pretty, were intelligent and behaved impeccably. She did not hide these preferences, thus causing jealousy and sadness among other children. "It gave me the feeling," expresses one former pupil, "that if you were clean and polite, you were liked by Stefa." Nevertheless, some former pupils quoted by Shimon Sachs and Ronit Plotkin in their book *Stefa, The Woman Behind Korczak* (Papyrus, Tel Aviv, in Hebrew) spoke very highly about Stefa. One former pupil for instance recalled how nicely Stefa treated her when she had a terrible toothache and how she used to dress up the girls for *Pesah*, spraying some perfume on each one of them.

Stefa had a very difficult task. With only a housekeeper, a cook, twenty students working four hours a day and two paid

educators, she managed a Children's Home with one hundred destitute children. No wonder that Stefa wrote to a friend in 1925: "I am so tired, although I do not have physical complaints.... I never felt pity for myself.... You did not know me in the past. But now I have become so single-minded. It is so difficult to go away from the Children's Home even for a few hours."

What Stefa wanted most was to visit Eretz Israel. In 1930 she wrote to her former pupil Vega Lipiec (born Biber) living in Kibbutz Ein Harod:

Already a hundred times I have wanted to drop everything and travel to you. Your last letter made me feel even more so. But this year I have many obligations till September 1st. I have already laid money aside. The inheritance from my mother makes it possible for me to travel third class on the boat. But, above all, we have to take care of the orphanage and the "boursa," the educating of educators. And half our personnel is going to leave.... Your letters interest everybody in Dom Sierot. Everybody gets an answer to his problems.... I started to learn Hebrew. There are two special tables now here in Dom Sierot's dining room where we only speak Hebrew. But it is difficult. Either the language is difficult or my brains are already old. But at least I want to speak a few words of Hebrew when I come.

In 1932 Stefa finally visited Vega in Ein Harod. She came again in 1936 and in 1938-1939. Korczak also visited Ein Harod and his former pupils in Eretz Israel in 1934 and 1936.

During Stefa's stay in Ein Harod she considered remaining there. But on April 31, 1939, she wrote to Jakow and Janka Kutalczuk (both of whom had worked in Dom Sierot, but had made *aliyah*): "We will not see each other in Eretz Israel, because the day after tomorrow, the second of May 1939, I leave on a Rumanian boat from Haifa and go to Warsaw.... I make no plans for the future, because I do not know what plans to make."

On the morning of September 1, 1939, the German Army invaded Poland. On February 15, 1940, Stefa sent a letter to Ein Harod through the International Red Cross: "We are healthy. I work in the orphanage a little, but Korczak does very much more. I did not come because I could not come without the children. Yours, Stefa."

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 therefore you must have patience. I greet everybody warmly. Regards, Stefa." On August 6, 1942, the Germans came to Dom Sierot. An eyewitness, the social worker, N. Remba, stated that he saw the march of the children to the Umschlagplatz, from where the trains left to the Treblinka death camp. "This I will never forget.... This was no march to the train; it was a silent protest against banditry! All the children were lined up in fours. At the head, leading the procession, was Korczak, his eyes gazing in front of him, holding a child with each hand. A second group was headed by Stefania Wilczynska." ■