

Janusz Korczak and the rights of the child

Philip E Veerman

The author is a social worker and teacher. He is currently writing a book on the rights of the child as a project for the University of Amsterdam.

In this article the life and works of the Polish-Jewish paediatrician and educator Janusz Korczak, pen-name of Dr. Henryk Goldszmit (1878–1942) will be described. Korczak was a pioneer in the field of children's rights. In the study of children's rights it is valuable to look at his work. It is probably more valuable than studying the work of legal philosophers like John Rawls [the author of *A Theory of Justice*, (1972)]. Referring to Rawls' work for 'a justification for according children rights to fair treatment' was suggested by Victor L Worsfold in a special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* vol. 44, no. 1, February 1974 – on the subject. But Rawls is a legal philosopher and has only explained who is included in his theory and who not¹. Contrary to Hobbes, Locke and Mill who did not specially mention children in their theories, Rawls made an effort to include them. But Rawls is not really 'child-centred'.

Korczak served the child and his rights as practically no one in history ever did. Not only did he formulate ideas about the rights of the child, but he tried for more than thirty years to put them into practice. He was Director of a Jewish orphanage *Dom Sierot* from 1912–42. For many years he was also involved in the work of an orphanage for children of Polish workers: *Our Home*. Korczak died with the children of his Jewish orphanage in the gaschambers of Treblinka. He had refused to leave his children alone.

Korczak's ideas

In 1929 Korczak published *The Right of the Child to Respect*. The title of this book is the basic theme of all of his works. He protested against the attitude of many educators who behave as 'if there were two lives, one serious and respectable' (the adults'), 'the other indulgently tolerated, of less value'² (the children's).

Korczak wrote: 'There are no children as such only men; but men with different experiences, different drives and different reactions'³. He rejected that there is such a thing as 'child innocence', which he called a 'sweet illusion'. In his book *How to Love a Child*⁴ he argued that 'one of the worst blunders is to think that pedagogy is the

science of the child . . . when it is the science of men'.

What Korczak means by *the right of the child to respect*, becomes more clear when one considers the other rights that he formulated. He wrote about respect for failure and for the tears of children. 'People take the tears of adults more seriously than those of children, he once bitterly remarked'. He pleaded for respect for the child's belongings, property and a right to privacy. Respect should also be shown for 'the labour of developing knowledge'. He formulated the 'child's right to an answer to his questions'.

Korczak warned against overprotection of children by adults. Provocatively he formulated 'the child's right to his or her own death'. This was not a plea for euthanasia, but a plea to let the child make his own failures. Korczak thought that we should not be too anxious that a child might hurt himself. But also he was not for a 'laissez-faire' kind of education in which an 'overdose' of freedom is allowed.

A Children's Parliament can turn into chaos, he warned in his book for children, *King Matt the First* which has just been published in the English translation by Richard Lourie, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York). Little Matt tried to reform the world and give children more rights (by creating a Children's Parliament). Bettelheim considered the book a Bildungsroman, wherein we are told about the emotional, moral and personal development of a hero like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister or Rolland's Jean Christophe. Bettelheim wrote in an introduction to the English translation, that the paediatrician Goldszmit (Korczak) was convinced that children must have the right to govern themselves, and that he was an ardent pleader for children's rights.

I don't think Bettelheim is right to point out that 'liberation' was one of Korczak's goals. Modern American educators now sometimes write about 'liberation' of children (John Holt for instance, the author of *Escape from Childhood*). These children's-lib people, often write about children as if they were already adults. One can probably consider Korczak as *the* pioneer of the children's rights movement. He was dedicated to giving children more rights, without making them into adults. Bettelheim's use of the word 'liberation' in this

context might mislead the reader about Korczak's real intentions.

A children's charter

At its plenary session of 26 September 1924 the Fifth Assembly of the League of Nations adopted unanimously a resolution in which the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (commonly known as the Declaration of Geneva) was endorsed and member-states were invited to 'be guided by its principles'. The tone of the Declaration was not Korczak's style. He wrote of the Declaration of Geneva in *The Right of the Child to Respect* (1929) 'The authors of the Declaration of Geneva have mistaken duties for rights. The tone of this Declaration is persuasion, not one of making demands. The Declaration is only an appeal for good will, a request for more understanding'.

Korczak's tone was unique in this period, but also his way of looking at things. He saw a world in which the adults had all the rights and children lived in slavery. He tried to change this by his writings and his practical work.

Korczak: man of praxis

In a way the Jewish Orphanage *Dom Sierot* and the orphanage *Our Home* were an extension of Korczak's personality (and of course of the managers of these homes, Stefania Wilczynska and Maryna Falska). Korczak never belonged to a 'school' and he did not try to create one. He had no dogmas and he did not write in jargon. Korczak was more a man of praxis. It will be difficult to imitate his self-government model.

From 1912–42 Korczak spent most of his week in the Jewish orphanage in Krochmalnastreet in Warsaw. He lived there on the third floor, next to the dormitory of 50 boys. He tried to stimulate the responsibility of the children themselves. He thought a lot about how to prevent the adults in his home from working in ways that would emphasize their authority and possibly be unjust to the vulnerable. He devised a written constitution, a 'codex' of a thousand paragraphs.

The Polish writer Igor Newerly (Korczak's former secretary) tells in his book *Zywe Wiczanie* (Warsaw, 1978) how Korczak picked up this idea. In 1783 the National Educational Committee (KEN) formulated such a codex for schools. 'Nobody studied this already yellow-looking report, but

Korczak was inspired by it and started to write his own codex', writes Newerly.

Adults and children were equal before the court of *Dom Sierot*. Weekly the court of five children and a secretary (often an adult) was in session. Korczak was also brought before the court: once for putting a small girl on a high closet and leaving her there as a practical joke.

The satisfaction was visible when the court announced its verdict: the defendant guilty as charged, according to paragraph 100 of the codex ('the court declares that the charge is justified'). From then on, Korczak was called 'setka' (one hundred in Polish) by the children. The book *Chowanna* of B. F. Trentowski (1842) also inspired, according to Newerly, Korczak to introduce such a court in to his orphanage. He also introduced a Parliament ('Sejm'). Korczak was convinced that if you treat children as respectable people, they themselves will be full of respect for others.

Korczak also tried to replace assumptions and suspicions by overt facts (the real opinion of the children's community). There were public opinion votes on children and educators: every newcomer (child or educator) had to face such a plebiscite: each child wrote on a piece of paper a plus (yes, I like him), a minus (no, I don't like him) or a zero (I don't know).

An important instrument was work: children cleaned the home, helped in the kitchen and dining room. For this work they would receive a certain number of 'work credits'. A postcard (a so called 'commemorative card') could be bought with them.

Dressed in an old coat Korczak spent quite a bit of time cleaning tables and polishing shoes in the basement. Some visitors, who never had met him before, thought that the old man polishing shoes, was the janitor.

A former pupil wrote to me: 'it is important to note that independent thinking was not stifled in Dom Sierot. Children's questions were not swept under the rug, but were answered. Considering the period when oppression existed in the home, as well as in the country at large, it was quite an accomplishment. The seed of independent thinking planted in Dom Sierot remained with me'.

If the Germans had not occupied Poland and deported most of the 3.35 million Jews to the gaschambers, the orphanage would have existed for many more years.

On 5 August 1942 the children, the manager of the Home Stefania Wilczynska and Korczak walked to the Umschlagplatz from where the trains left to the deathcamp. A witness of this terrible sight, wrote to me: 'I remember seeing Janusz Korczak walking with the children and many other people. There were many Germans around them. When I came home and saw my dear parents, I started crying because I knew this



Above: Shaftesbury House for Boys *circ.* 1910 courtesy Ph E Veerman.

Below: The same building 76 years later and now a local authority day nursery © GAC

would probably be the end for all of us'⁵.

References

1. Personal communication with Prof. Stephen R. Goldstein of the Harry Sacher Institute for Legislative Research and Comparative Law of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.
2. This book is not yet published in English. There is a German translation available: Korczak, Janusz, *Das Recht des Kindes auf Achtung*, published by Van Den Hoeck & Ruprecht in Gottingen and Zurich. Parts of this book are also in: Korczak, Janusz, *Selected Works*, (edited by Martin Wolins), Warsaw 1967, published for the National Science Foundation in Washington D.C.

3. Korczak, Janusz, *If I were young again*. Also not translated in English. There is a German translation: *Wenn Ich Wieder Klein Bin*; is published by Van Den Hoeck & Ruprecht.

4. Korczak, Janusz, *How to Love a Child*, published in Warsaw in 1920.

It is not available in English, but is published in Gottingen as *Wie Man ein Kind lieben soll*, 1979.

5. Testimony sent to me by Mrs. Kempinski (born: Chawa Hurowitz).

This letter is now in the archives of Yad Vashem (The Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem).

Janusz Korczak in London

In the *Chronology of the life, activities and works of Janusz Korczak* (published in English by the Kosciuszko Foundation in New York) we read that in '1911 Korczak was in all likelihood in London, where he visits various educational centers, among others, a school and a home for orphans in Forest Hill near London'.

Being interested in the life and work of Janusz Korczak, this aroused my interest and I tried to find out what this 'Forest Hill' could have been. We will probably never find out when exactly Korczak was in London, because he never mentions in which year he was there. We only have an article by Korczak published in the Polish professional journal *Swiatlo* (which means 'Lights'), published in 1911 (No. 2, pp. 30-2). And there is a letter of February 9, 1942 to the Jewish Council in the Ghetto in Warsaw: 'I graduated from secondary school and University in Warsaw. My education was completed in the clinics of Berlin (one year) and Paris (six months). A month's excursion to London helped me to understand the quintessence of charity work (a rewarding experience)'.

In the article in *Swiatlo* he described his visit to Forest Hill. He described two houses that 'are like twins', with 30 children in each house. He writes about the park-like environment, the lawn, the workshop, the animals that were there for the children and a small museum. He was impressed by these physical arrangements, but it also made him jealous.

He was astonished by the fact that the people in Forest Hill expressed surprise that he was so impressed by all of this. 'What is so interesting about that?' they kept asking. In the *Directory of Child Saving Institutions* of these days two homes in the Forest Hill neighbourhood are mentioned: *Shaftesbury House*, a home for boys, founded in 1873, with 40 boys (from 7-10 years of age) and *Louise House*, a girls home, founded in 1881 for 30 girls (age 6-10 years). Both homes were called 'industrial schools'. Korczak mentions a workshop in his article.

In Shaftesbury House and Louise House the children did work (shoemaking and gardening for boys, work in the laundry for girls). For their schooling most of the children went daily to a school unconnected with the Homes. In 1911 it was 'Rathfern Road, London County School at Catford, not far from Shaftesbury House'. Korczak's article on Forest Hill conveyed the impression that it was a friendly place (compared with other industrial schools at the time) and this is probably justified.

Soon (in 1912 he was appointed as the director of Dom Sierot) Korczak would



Above: Janusz Korczak with pupils of *Dom Sierot*, Warsaw. A pre-1942 photograph, © Ghetto Fighters House, Tel Aviv, Israel.

Below: Korczak's *King Matt The First* is performed in the Habimah Theatre, Tel Aviv, in November 1985. © Rachel Hirsch.

find himself with the same kind of children: 'Mother in bad health, earns a little as a domestic servant, father dead, . . . mother dead, father, a carman, left with nine children under fifteen years of age, . . . father deserted, mother left with five young children . . . (from the *Annual Report of the Boys and Girls Industrial Homes, Forest Hill*, 1910).

Was the visit to Forest Hill interesting to the young paediatrician? More important was his decision not to have children of his own. This decision he took sitting in a park in London.

Korczak's father went insane, when Korczak was eleven. His father died in a psychiatric hospital. Korczak took very seriously what Ellen Kay (in her book *The Century of the Child*, published in 1900 in Sweden and translated into Polish) had written: 'the first right of the child is to choose his own parents'. It was not a correct expression of what she really

wanted to say. But this 'right' was formulated to provoke discussion.

Kay meant by this 'right' more the duty of the potential parents to consider really well if they should have children at all and the right of the child not to be born. If a child was to be born with a chronic illness or a handicap and to suffer so badly, maybe he should not be born at all, Kay argued.

In those days the idea that psychiatric illnesses were inherited was dominant. Kay (explaining what she meant by her 'first right of the child') had written that 'conscientious young people see it nowadays as their duty rather to miss the pleasure of parenthood, than to pass on an unhappy heritage'. Korczak took this 'first right of the child' very seriously. Because of this, he took the decision not to start a family. 'For a son I chose the idea of serving the child and his rights', Korczak wrote once to a friend.