



Janusz Korczak, photographed in 1935

IN 1912 a Jewish orphanage opened its doors on Krochmalna street in Warsaw, with room for about 100 children. In the 30 years of its existence, that experiment in residential care became a treasured and still impressive community. On August 5, 1942, Janusz Korczak and his children were brought to the death camp of Treblinka.

Forty-three years after his death, the works of Korczak make the impression that they could have been written today. His ideas about the rights of the child, for instance, are of great current interest. In 1978 a draft of a Convention on the Rights of the Child was presented to the UN. Korczak was one of the first professionals to write about the subject.

It is not that long ago that children were considered the possessions of adults. In the U.S. the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed in 1875, some 11 years after the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was established.

Korczak described how he put his ideas into practice in his book, *How Does One Love a Child?*, which was published in 1920, and has been translated into Hebrew, French, German and Dutch. Residential experiments in childcare are a relatively new idea. Early pioneers were August Aichhorn in Oberhollabrunn near Vienna, whose experiment lasted from 1918-1922, and Homer Lane, whose "Little Commonwealth" in Dorsetshire started in 1914 and was closed in 1918. Only recently has Korczak received attention as a pioneer in residential care. An international conference on Janusz Korczak and the importance of his work will be held from June 19-23 at Kibbutz Shefayim near Tel Aviv.

"I LIVED in a small village along the river Vistula," recalls a man who is now 65. "My father had died when I was two and my mother remarried a man with three children. When I was seven we moved to Warsaw, my mother divorced and had to look for a job. She could not take care of me."

Most children entered the orphanage at the age of seven, but, unlike that boy, the majority had lost both their parents. Many came from the slums. Two girls who came to the Dom Sierot (House of the Orphans) — they were motherless and their father got a bullet in the back in an uprising and could no longer work as a porter — had to learn how to wash themselves.

A former pupil, who described himself as a "boy educated in the streets until I came to the children's home," remembers how fine it was to sleep that first night in a bed and to have a pillow with fresh hay.

Dr. Janus Goldszmit was already a well-known pediatrician and author, who had written the short stories *Salon Children* and *Street Children* under the pen-name Korczak when he was asked to join in setting up a new orphanage. Dr. Goldszmit stopped his practice to become its director. Though he weighed his children and measured their height almost weekly, he became increasingly concerned with educational practice rather than health. For him this meant living among the orphans. His involvement can be compared with that of the Swiss educationalist Pestalozzi (1746-1827), who wrote "their happiness was my happiness, their soup was my soup; I slept among the children."

Korczak had his room on the third floor, next to the dormitory of the 50 boys. The house was organized according to his ideas, but it was Stefania Wilczyńska who provided continuity of care.

Born in 1886, the daughter of a well-to-do Jewish family in Warsaw, Stefania worked with Korczak till the end. She had studied at the University of Liège in Belgium and was 25 when she came to live in the orphanage next to the girls' dormitory. During Korczak's absence, she ran the home as he would.

When the first World War broke out in 1914, Korczak was called into the medical corps of the Russian army. The war took him as far as Manchuria. But his thoughts were with the children, as seen in a letter he wrote to a sixteen-year-old girl, a former resident of the home. In the letter he expresses his concern for her health and her work and wonders whether she was gaining

# Fighter for the rights of the child

Philip Veeman examines why Janusz Korczak, one of the famous figures of the Holocaust, still has much to teach as an educator

enough professional training. He also expresses his regrets that the war had taken him from his children. At the front, he wrote *How Does One Love a Child?*

BACK in Warsaw in 1918 (now the capital of independent Poland), Korczak worked both in *Dom Sierot* and in *Nasz Dom*, a home for Polish Catholic children, headed by Maryna Falska. In 1919 he was called up in the Polish army and put in charge of combating contagious diseases in hospitals. He fell ill himself with typhus. Afraid that he might bring the illness to his children, he went to his mother, who nursed him in her apartment. He recuperated, but his mother fell ill and died. In deep sorrow Korczak wrote the book *Alone with God*.

Stefa Wilczyńska is described as "an efficient person" and "an excellent organizer." Maybe because of her administrative capacities, a former pupil, now living in Israel, describes the home as "a place so organized, it ran like a Swiss watch." But besides the good organization, Korczak and Stefa Wilczyńska succeeded in creating an atmosphere where "we had a sense of belonging and were free from fear."

In a time when methods in many children's homes could be characterized as "authoritarian," and in which warm relationships between pupils and educators were unthinkable, Korczak wrote about the "despotism of many educators."

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, and a court for the orphanage.

Adults and children were equal before the court in *Dom Sierot*. Weekly the court of five children and a secretary (often an adult) was in session. Its verdicts and sentences were pronounced according to the Codex of a Thousand Paragraphs. One of the former pupils thinks "it was the best way of dispensing justice."

Korczak's co-worker, Joseph Arnon, wrote that Korczak himself was once convicted of violating Paragraph 100 for putting a small boy on top of a high closet and leaving him there as a practical joke. The satisfaction was visible when the court announced its verdict: the defendant guilty as charged. From then on, Korczak was teasingly called *Setka* ("one hundred" in Polish) by the children.

IN 1929 his book *The Child's Right to Respect* was published. In it Korczak expressed his anger that so many adults depreciate the feelings of children — their sorrow, anger, love and pride. The institution of the court, and also of a parliament ("*sejm*") meant that in the orphanage not only the adults had the power to make the decisions. Korczak's belief in the dignity of all men became the unifying philosophy.

"When I look back," writes a former pupil now living in the U.S., "I find that without preaching, I learned the Golden Rule — treat others the way you want others to treat you."  
Of course *Dom Sierot* was not

heaven on earth. This Golden Rule was violated there, too, as might be illustrated by the following story from a former pupil. "Because Miss Stefa wanted to stop me from wetting my bed, something that I could not help and made me very ashamed of myself, she hung my wet sheets out of the window for everybody to see. This of course made me even more ashamed."

OLDER children learned to be caring for those new to the home and younger. Every new child was assigned an older one, who helped, for instance, if the new child did not understand something in Polish. Many new arrivals spoke only Yiddish, but the conversations and daily routine in *Dom Sierot* were in Polish. The first months this "guardian" sat next to the new child at the dinner table.

"We considered ourselves as brothers and sisters, rather than people who lived through a particular experience. It was this feeling that enabled us to remain close, lifelong friends. In addition, we always closed ranks, when any one of us was in danger.

"That does not mean that we did not have disagreements among ourselves, but we protected each other, when there was danger. Among the five boys who attended school with me was an epileptic. We would never let him walk alone to school. It was a 45-minute walk, a good part of it through a Christian neighbourhood. When he suffered an epileptic attack, one of us would place his coat under his head. Others would loosen his collar and make sure that his tongue was free. We would then form a protective circle.

"There were times when we were attacked by gentle boys. We took the beating in order to protect our sick friend. After the attack subsided, we did our best to make him feel at ease."

Former pupil Aline Edestin writes in *Silhouettes du Siècle* (published in Paris) that a prize was often given for good companionship. "On the evening that a prize was given to one of us, we had a party."

ALL children had duties in the house, helping with cleaning, washing and preparing the food. For this work the children would receive a certain amount of "work credits." A postcard (a so-called "commemorative card") could be earned with the work credits. All of the 15 former pupils I spoke with still mention with pride receiving these handsome cards.

Only Korczak, Miss Stefa, a cook and maybe one or two others received a salary from the orphanage's governing board. Much of the educational work was done by students (*bourgeois*), who received room and board in the orphanage in exchange for work with the children several hours a day. They had to be with the children at breakfast and again when the children came home from school. Every evening they had to record their observations. In the same book Miss Stefa or Korczak would then add their comments in red ink. Some of these books are preserved in the archives of Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot.

Korczak spent quite a bit of time cleaning tables and polishing shoes in the basement, dressed in an old coat. He wanted to demonstrate how to do these things properly. Some visitors, who never had met Korczak before, thought that the old man polishing the shoes, was the janitor.

CULTURE occupied a prominent place among the home's activities.

"We had famous Jews visit us," remembers a former pupil. Among them was I.L. Peretz, the famous Yiddish writer. Many plays were performed by the children. When the orphanage was in the ghetto and times were really bad, Korczak wanted his children to perform *The Post Office* by Tagore. He wanted the children to become acquainted with the Angel of Death, a prominent theme in the play. Two days after the performance, on July 18, 1942, the director of the play was deported by the Germans. About two weeks later the Angel of Death came for the children, Miss Stefa and Dr. Henryk Goldszmit, alias Janusz Korczak.

Philip Veeman is spending a year in Jerusalem where he is collecting material about Korczak's orphanage for his research project on Korczak as a pioneer in residential care.