

The little ruler

THE KING was gravely ill, and his ministers discussed what to do when he died.

"I know," replied the minister of justice. "According to the law, after the death of the king his eldest son inherits the throne. That's why he is called the successor to the throne. If the king dies, his eldest son takes the throne."

"But the king has only one son."
"That's all he needs."
"All right, but the king's son is little Matt. What kind of king would he be?" (...)

"But gentlemen," said the minister of education, "how is it possible to have a king who does not know how to write or count, who does not know geography or grammar?"

"I don't know what will happen," said the minister of justice, red with anger, "but I know one thing - the law says that after the death of a king his son inherits the throne."

"But Matt is too little," shouted all the ministers."

HOW LITTLE Matt mounted the throne, and tried to reform the world, is well known in Israel. Some 80,000 playgoers (75 per cent of their children) have seen Habimah's *Hamelech Mattia HaRishon*, with the 12-year-old Doron Schaeffer in the role of Mattia.

The life and work of the author, the Polish-Jewish physician and educator Henryk Goldszmit (1878-

KING MATT THE FIRST by Janusz Korczak, with an introduction by Bruno Bettelheim. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 332 pp. \$15.95.

Philip Veerman

1942), who published under the pen-name Janusz Korczak, does not need an introduction here in Israel. Korczak's works have been translated into many languages, but in the United States and England he has remained practically unknown. Yet his *Ghetto Diary* (published in New York in 1978) was an important event. Now Farrar, Straus and Giroux have published *King Matt the First* (the original Polish edition came out in 1923), and there seems a good chance that Korczak's books will get better known in the United States.

This translation deserves a lot of attention, for Korczak, after all, achieved a classic. Bruno Bettelheim, who provides the introduction, considers it a *Bildungsroman* - that is, it provides a chronicle of the emotional, moral and personal development of such a hero as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* or Rolland's *Jean Christophe*.

THE THEME of the book is more rights for children. Bettelheim observes that Korczak, who was a

pediatrician, was convinced that children must have the right to govern themselves, and devoted himself to their liberation. However, although Korczak was a convinced defender of children's rights, I think Bettelheim is incorrect in saying that liberation was one of his aims. Modern American educators sometimes write about the "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. Korczak wanted to give children more rights, but he didn't want to make them into adults. A children's parliament easily turns into chaos, he warns, in *King Matt the First*. It follows that Bettelheim's use of the word "liberation" in this context might mislead the reader about Korczak's real intentions.

THIS NEW translation demonstrates the steady interest in the works of Korczak. Yet certain episodes do seem dated, for instance the section about the Negro girl Klu Klu and the cannibals in Africa. Bettelheim is right to explain that Korczak was not writing for Americans but for Poles. At the time he wrote his book, they had very little first-hand contact with black people.

As distinct from the editions in Danish, German and Dutch, this new *King Matt* does not have illustrations (except for the picture of Korczak himself at the age of 10 - "When I was the little boy you see in the photograph, I wanted to do all the things that are in this book. But I forgot to, and now I am old.") □