



JANUSZ KORCZAK

At Treblinka, the Nazi death camp where more than 800,000 Polish Jews were exterminated, a stark monument stands in an incongruous pastoral setting. Arranged in concentric circles around a central tower are large jagged rocks, 17,000 in all, that resemble broken gravestones. Each represents a destroyed Jewish *community!* Only one memorializes an individual - the pediatrician, educator, activist for children's rights and guardian of orphans: Henryk Goldszmit, better known by his pseudonym Janusz Korczak.

Born in Warsaw in 1878 into a family of wealthy assimilated Jews, his father a lawyer, his grandfather a physician, the boy was brought up almost ignorant of his religious heritage. The family were advocates of the *Haskala* which encouraged Jews to join the secular world. At age eleven his father developed mental illness and the family's fortune declined. During his youth, Henryk played with children who were poor and lived in bad neighborhoods; his passion for helping disadvantaged youth continuing into his adulthood. He wished to become a writer, but his family prevailed upon him to follow a more practical career.

Henryk Goldszmit was one of the few Jews to be accepted for medical studies at the University of Warsaw from where he graduated in 1905. Impatient with his training, he considered most of his professors to be pompous, insensitive men who seemed detached from the suffering of their patients. As a student he gave free medical aid to the indigent and later when in practice, he was like a medical Robin Hood who took fees from the rich and charged only a token amount to the poor. He continued his training in pediatrics both in Berlin and Paris where he studied with famous physicians (e.g. Virchow, Marfan, Charcot.)

During the Russian Civil War he served in field hospitals and wards in the Ukraine and in Manchuria. On the day that Germany invaded, September 1, 1939, he put on his Polish army doctor uniform and rarely took it off until the day he died. (A Polish friend of mine says that he wore it "ostentatiously.")

Simultaneous with his medical work, Goldszmit began to write poetry and fiction, always with strong moral and idealistic themes. When asked whether the two careers were compatible, he replied, “Being a doctor didn’t interfere with Chekhov becoming a great writer. It deepened his creative work. To write anything of value, one has to be a diagnostician.” As a second year medical student he entered a play that he’d written about mental illness in a literary competition under the pen name Janusz Korczak (pronounced Kor-chock) that was derived from a 19th century novel. Although it won only honorable mention, the name stuck and for the next four decades he led a double life: Dr. Henryk Goldszmit, the pediatrician and child psychologist, and Janusz Korczak, the author of popular children’s books and champion of the rights of children.

Korczak’s most famous book, *King Matt the First* (1928) was a parable adored by generations of European children and translated into twenty languages. In it the little prince Matthew inherits the crown of a mythical country and sets himself the task of righting all the world’s wrongs. The land is governed by children while adults are sent back to school and they succeeded for awhile before scheming adults prevail and banish Matt to permanent exile. Korczak believed in the basic decency of children and treated them with absolute respect. A prolific writer, he described his methods in *How to Love a Child* in which he noted that since children are relatively uncorrupted they should demonstrate more responsibility than adults.

In 1910 Korczak decided to give up both his successful pediatric practice and his literary career to become the director of an orphanage in Warsaw. He justified his decision to leave medicine since, in effect, the orphanage would serve as a laboratory where he could develop his own educational system based on objective observations — “What a fever, a cough or nausea is for the physician, so a smile, a tear or a blush should be for the educator.”

With a devoted colleague, Stefa Wilczynska, he opened an orphanage for Jewish children in 1912 and nine years later, another for Catholics. In these “children’s republics” he experimented with his progressive ideas by allowing the

children to govern themselves with as much independence as possible. Disinterested in personal affairs, he never married and lived a monastic existence. He performed the most menial tasks such as mopping the floor, making beds, ironing handkerchiefs or cobbling shoes. Every morning at 6 o'clock he emptied the chamber pots while wearing a green smock; more than once he was mistaken for a janitor.

From 1926 to 1939, Korczak edited a weekend supplement to a popular newspaper that was entirely written by children, thus providing them with a national voice. About 10,000 letters a year were received including articles, essays, news and poetry. During the same period, Korczak was offered his own radio program. The officials insisted that he adopt another pseudonym since they didn't want to be accused of allowing a known Jewish educator a chance to shape the minds of Polish children. Believing that it was better to seize the opportunity anonymously than not at all, he agreed to be called "The Old Doctor." It was said that on his program he spoke to children as if they were adults and to adults as if they were children. He once explained, "Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today."

As political conditions deteriorated, Korczak and Stefa visited Palestine both in 1934 and 1936 and were intrigued with life at kibbutz Ein Harod. They were tempted to emigrate with the children but circumstances would not permit and with the German takeover of Poland, the tragedy of Polish Jewry began to play out. The orphanages were closed and Korczak and two hundred of his charges, along with about 400,000 other Jews, were forced into a walled ghetto eleven miles long and comprising one thousand acres. There he resumed his medical practice, but limited to 184 calories a day and enduring inhuman conditions, the victims of the Warsaw ghetto began to starve. For nearly two years Korczak and Stefa did their best to provide food and encouragement and to create an environment of normalcy but conditions deteriorated inexorably.



The Orphans' Home on 92 Krochmalna street around 1935

Friends from the outside arranged a plan for him to escape, but Korczak chose to remain with his children: "You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this." In his diary he wrote, "Our bodies may live forever in green grass or a cloud - we just don't know...I would only like to be conscious when I die. I want to be able to tell the children 'Good-bye' and wish them freedom to choose their own way."

On Korczak's 64th birthday, the authorities were informed that large shipments of people would be sent daily to Treblinka. The end had come. August 6, 1942 was the date chosen for liquidating the orphanages and "stray" children. Korczak felt that there was no need to tell the children what was happening and had his staff say they were going for a treat in the country and to take a few toys along. They marched out of the building, heads held high, and carrying their flag that Korczak had designed — green with white blossoms and the Star of David. Following are some eye-witness accounts:

Slowly they go down the steps, line up in rows, in perfect order and discipline, as usual. Their little eyes are turned toward their doctor, they are strangely calm, they feel almost well. Their doctor is going with them so what do they have to be afraid of? They are not alone, they are not abandoned...

The children are calm but inwardly they must feel it, they must sense it intuitively, otherwise how could you explain the deadly seriousness in their pale little faces? But they are marching quietly in orderly rows, calm and earnest, and at the head of them is Janusz Korczak...

When I met the procession...all the children were singing together. Korczak marched with two of the youngest children in his arms. Their faces were also smiling for apparently he had been telling them funny stories... Singing to the accompaniment of a little fiddler, they walked in double file in the hot sun the two miles to the collection site, their wooden shoes clattering and thousands of faces silently watching.

When they had to climb 70 steps over the ghetto bridge to get to the Umschlagplatz, some of the smallest children stumbled or needed to be pushed. Many jeering Poles yelled "Good-bye Jews." At the assembly point the children were counted and then their yellow armbands were snipped off and thrown into the center of the courtyard. A policeman remarked that "it looked like a field of buttercups."

The last recorded sight was that of a solitary man comforting the children. A new rallying cry in the ghetto was “Remember Korczak’s orphans,” as if only now every Jew realized that they were next. Just two weeks after the orphanage was evacuated, the doomed resistance movement began in the Warsaw ghetto.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in my book *Case Reports. Short Stories about Jewish Doctors* that was published in 1997.

Michael Nevins



The following poem, translated from Polish, was written by Jerzy Ficowski and appeared in his book of Holocaust poems titled *Reading Ashes*:

In Memory of Janusz Korczak

*What did the Old Doctor do
in the cattle wagon
bound for Treblinka on the fifth of August
over the few hours of the bloodstream
over the dirty river of time
I do not know
what did Charon of his own free will
the ferryman without an oar do
did he give out to the children
what remained of gasping breath
and leave for himself
only frost down the spine
I do not know
did he lie to them for instance
in small
numbing doses
groom the sweaty little heads
for the scurrying lice of fear
I do not know
yet for all that yet later yet there
in Treblinka
all their terror all the tears
were against him
oh it was only now
just so many minutes say a lifetime
whether a little or a lot
I was not there I do not know
suddenly the Old Doctor saw
the children had grown
as old as he was
older and older
that was how fast they had to go grey as ash*



Monument in the Old Jewish cemetery in Warsaw