

Dr Janusz Korczak and his legacy

“Everyone makes so much of Korczak’s last decision to go with the children to the train. But his whole life was made up of moral decisions. The decision to become a children’s doctor. The decision to give up a full-time medical practice and writing career to take care of poor orphans. The decision to go with the Jewish orphans to the ghetto. As for that last decision to go with the children to Treblinka, it was part of his nature. It was who he was. He wouldn’t understand why we are making so much of it today.”

—Misha, Jewish teacher who trained with Janusz Korczak¹

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Janusz Korczak was a pediatrician, author, and philanthropist who was a champion for human rights and especially for the amelioration of the living conditions of impoverished children. He devoted his entire life to the improvement of the world and to bringing happiness to the lives of children through his novels, the central themes of which revolved around children in need. Throughout his life, medical practice in Poland, and in evacuation centres in Harbin, Tao’an Xian during the Russo-Japanese war 1905–1906, he led discourses and lectures on the state of public health and child rearing, and he influenced the improvement of social practices

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and instructive methods. While Korczak is perhaps best remembered for his selfless act of refusing freedom and choosing to accompany the orphaned children under his care into the Treblinka gas chambers during the Second World War, his biggest legacy is that his teachings continue to permeate society and influence educational practise. Today, there are active Korczak institutions around the world, and his philosophies on education, health care, and social issues have been recognized by the world education community. In 1978, for the commemoration of the centenary of Korczak’s birth, he was made an honorary fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and that year was declared the Year of Janusz Korczak by UNESCO. More recently, the year 2012 was declared the Year of Janusz Korczak by the government of Poland.²

Closer to home, the University of British Columbia, in collaboration with the Janusz Korczak Association of Canada, commemorated Korczak with the installation of a bronze Korczak bas relief, now displayed in the UBC Department of Education. A theatrical version of Korczak’s novel *King Matt the First* was performed at the 2012 Chutzpah! International Festival of Jewish Performing Arts.

As well, Janusz Korczak has been named an honorary member of the BC Pediatric Society.

Born Henryk Goldszmit, Korczak did not change his name because of anti-Semitism. Rather, he took the name of the main character of one of Polish writer Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski’s books (intentionally a bit distorted), randomly chosen by a young author as his pseudonym. As a doctor he always remained Dr Goldszmit. Whether he should be presented and perceived as Jewish or Polish seems less relevant (he was both, a Polish citizen of Jewish roots), and he is remembered in history as Janusz Korczak, the name he had chosen for his own privacy, as an author of the books and publications.

Early life

Korczak was born into a prominent Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland, in 1878. After the death of his father, Korczak “learned at a young age that children are not always respected by adults or given the physical and psychological space to flourish.”³ The environment of his upbringing instilled in him a great humility and sensitivity to social problems—during his youth he demonstrated an interest in science, psychology, and education,

and indeed the psychology of education, which he began to explore through literary works. Korczak wrote his first pieces while still at school.

During Korczak's medical studies at the University of Warsaw, beginning in 1899, he was involved in many progressive social groups wherein he derided "all manifestations of evil, unfairness, and injustice"² and spoke out against poverty, unemployment, and social inequality. In fact, it was during his medical studies in Warsaw that Korczak worked as a tutor at children's summer camps and in this way he often had contact with the poor.

Maturing as a physician

After completing his medical studies in 1905, Korczak was mobilized to the Russo-Japanese front where he was forced to treat casualties under extreme circumstances. Later, during the First World War, Korczak once again experienced the horrors of war, working as a ward head in a field hospital in Ukraine. It was in Kiev that these war-torn and gravely injured children made a profound impression on him. It is probable that these early experiences paved Korczak's future, first as a pediatrician and later as an advocate for children's rights. Influenced by the difficulties of war, Korczak began condemning the brutality of war in articles that described the struggles of physicians and medics on the front and commented on social issues rampant during wartime.⁴

Developing a unique social and pedagogical program

Korczak traveled throughout Europe to further his medical education; he also gave lectures on the condition of public health while emphasizing the importance of sanitary living condi-

tions, good hygiene, and the crucial role these commonly overlooked practices played in the normal physical and psychological development of children. In works such as "Scales for infants in private practice" and "On the importance of breast feeding," Korczak's approaches to infant and

dignity, social welfare, justice, trust, mutual respect, morality, emotional and spiritual learning, economics, and health, mixing conventional didactic with practical teaching methods. These principles were rooted in the belief that children are people that are not so different from adults, as well as the rising awareness of children's rights and their contributing societal role. Borrowing heavily from the principles of Pestalozzi, Friedrich Fröebel, and Rousseau, and the ideas explored by Tolstoy in many of his essays, Korczak developed his own social and pedagogical program: "children are not future people, because they are people already ... whose souls contain the seeds of all those thoughts and emotions that we possess ... [and] as [they] develop, their growth must be gently directed."⁵ His views that "children should be fully understood ... must be respected and loved, treated as partners and friends ... [and that] one ought to behave towards [each child as] a respected, thinking and feeling human being"² are considered an integral component of the modern approach to social pedagogy.



Janusz Korczak bronze bas relief by Polish sculptor Marek Rona installed at the Faculty of Education at UBC in fall 2012. Photo provided by The Janusz Korczak Association of Canada.

youth health care were widely disseminated, published in celebrated medical journals, and generally accepted in the medical community.

During his travels, Korczak demonstrated an enhanced interest in the psychology of education and became familiar with the works of J.H. Pestalozzi, a Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer (1746–1827). He was further influenced by the educational theories of the period, namely the ideas brought forth by the New Education Movement: the progressive philosophy that the approach to education must be holistic and involve disparate elements, including human

Implementing the new program

Korczak began to implement his ideas in summer camps for children, experimenting with educational relationships as a partnership rather than the previous traditional model with the teacher as the definitive authority figure. He firmed up his theories and ideology on the treatment of children in an academic setting and continued to explore the inter-pupil, and pupil-educator relationships in the orphanage he established and became director of in 1912, called Dom Sierot in Warsaw. There, Korczak implemented

Continued on page 110

Continued from page 109

a system of self-checks, regulatory bodies, and a student-led court that dealt sentences to rule breakers. Korczak learned to “[speak] not to the children but with the children” and crystallized his knowledge of child psychology. It was during his time at the orphanage that Korczak published his now famous manifesto “How to love a child” on children’s rights, in which he stipulates that “children can only function well if provided with appropriate living conditions.”² Korczak provided the children of the orphanage with a climate conducive to educational furtherment. His pedagogical thoughts and philosophy are further elaborated on in “The child’s right to respect.”

With time Korczak began to write for children, and sometimes the charges he cared for in the orphanage were placed in main character roles of his novels. Stories such as *King Matt the First*, *King Matt on a Desert Island*, and *Little Jack’s Bankruptcy* explored the needs and difficult circumstances of poor children. “Korczak belong[ed] to [the] unique group of writers who were most at home in the company of the children for whom they created their stories.”¹ He often used fiction to break down the challenging topics that were central motifs in his works to prepare his young readers for the demands of real life.

Life in Nazi-occupied Poland

Korczak remained loyal to the orphaned children and ultimately devoted the end of his life to them by moving with the population of the orphanage to the Warsaw ghetto after the 1939 invasion of Poland by the Nazis. There he fought to maintain a semblance of dignity and a home-feel for the children. Because of Korczak’s righteousness and illustrious popularity with the citizens of Poland, he was offered sanctuary many times on the Aryan side. Remaining true to his ideals, Korczak

boarded the train from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp with nearly 200 children of the orphanage. In later years, many recounted the proud dignity with which the children boarded the trains thinking they were leaving the ghetto for a trip to the country with Korczak, who whispered words of hope to embolden his young charges, “it’s all right children, it will all be alright.”⁶

Korczak’s legacy

Janusz Korczak was a multifaceted personality whose ideas have transcended the boundaries of time. “As a result, his life work is still influencing the development of pedagogical thought and educational practice...” He devoted his life to putting smiles on children’s faces and ... to making adults better people. He was ever faithful to his conviction that “our strongest bond with life is the child’s open and radiant smile.” He also left future generations with a challenge: “it is inadmissible to leave the world as one finds it.”²

Unfortunately, despite the lessons taught by Korczak, “genocide throughout the 20th century remained one of the most prevalent forms of preventable mortality and morbidity for children.”⁷ We, as physicians (and people), must ensure that Korczak’s message continues to be heard and permeates society so that the global mistreatment and killing of children ends. Nevertheless, in spite of those statistics, steps to atone for the atrocities committed against humanity, and especially children, have been made. After the defeat of Hitler’s Nazi Germany and the Nuremberg trials, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed by the United Nations in 1948, in which basic human rights such as “the right to life, liberty, and security of person”⁸ are guaranteed.

In 1924, the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child was passed by the League of Nations; the prin-

ciples stipulated in that document were later passed into international law in 1989 by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ensuring that the “best interest of the child” is not overlooked. “The essential themes of UNCRC include the right to the basic needs for optimal growth and development; civil and political rights; and a right to safety and protection. The UN CRC is the first legally binding international document to recognize the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of the child.”⁹

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