Who was
Janusz Korczak?

Life and achievements of the famous pedagogue,
doctor and writer

An insight provided by the European Janusz Korczak Academy
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Janusz Korczak
His life, his achievements

by Katrin Diehl

In 1878 – it might have been 1879 as the father was not known for looking after his paperwork in time, Janusz Korczak, whose name was actually Henryk Goldszmit, was born in Warsaw. His family was Jewish but highly assimilated, of excellent repute in the city, and living a comfortable life.

When Henryk was 17, his father died. Henryk is heart broken. He takes upon himself day jobs to keep himself, his mother and his sister Anna afloat. Already as a child, he had a very keen sense for the suffering of others, particularly children the same age as him; now, as a young man, he experienced poverty first-hand.

After finishing school, something he did quite gladly as he never felt comfortable with the so called black pedagogy teaching methods, he starts studying medicine in Warsaw in 1898. He starts producing literary works, each of which clearly speaks to the author’s ambition to do right by children and stand by their side. He writes about children, for children, in newspapers and journals. Later, he runs his own radio broadcast on educational advice (“Happy Pedagogy”) that is highly popular with the listeners. As a writer, Henryk Goldszmit takes up a new name: He starts calling himself Janusz Korczak, and soon gains some fame as “Doctor Janusz Korczak”. He works at various hospitals and children’s summer camps, travels to big cities in Europe in order to learn from the work of his colleagues.

In 1911, he is made head of the newly-established “Dom Sierot” orphanage in Warsaw’s 92 Krochmalna Street; Korczak remains in this position until the orphanage is closed in 1942. The orphanage is his realm, his opportunity to implement all his ideas, thoughts, papers and theories. This is where he creates the “Children’s Republic”, into which he puts a vast amount of highly detailed thought (“Put up a chair under every window, make sure even the little ones can see outside!”). He is full of original ideas that seek to accommodate a child’s mind (“There, on my shelf, you find the bottle I keep filling with children’s tears…”). Everyday life for children needs some sort of structure, of regularity, according to Korczak. To achieve that, he employs Jewish holidays and above all the weekly Shabbat, to which he opened the door in his orphanage – if the children hadn’t already done so.

Korczak did this as a Jew, even though he has moved away from religion, he became increasingly more Jewish. So, holidays were a part of life in the orphanage, including a few made-up ones – first snow holiday, stay-in-bed-all-day holiday etc. Janusz Korczak observes his children closely, he faced adversity and had to re-examine his idealistic approach.
Sometimes he asked for too much of his children, sometimes they do the same with him, sometimes he runs his helpers ragged. He was not an easy man to work with, but the work at the “Dom” is very fulfilling for him. Korczak spends World War I as chief physician of an entire division’s military hospital. After the war, in 1918, he publishes his book “How To Love A Child” that makes his point of view and understanding of children relatable as well as his demand that adults reconsider their approach to children. In 1926, he establishes the world’s first newspaper made entirely by children and for children – die Kleine Rundschau ("Little Review").

In 1933, the National Socialists come to power in Germany. Korczak journeys to Palestine twice, looks at life in the Kibbutz and is very impressed with it. You could build something there for sure – he thought to himself, if only there wouldn’t have been this great longing for his native Poland, Warsaw, for his children. So he returns home.

In 1939, German troops invade Poland. In 1940 the Nazis established the Warsaw ghetto into which all Jews of the city had to move into, including Korczak’s entire orphanage. “The doctor” is ill and weak. Every morning, he goes out, a sack on his shoulder, to ask the inhabitants of the ghetto to spare some of their food for the children. Food is the most important thing at this point. Almost equally as important is maintaining some sort of everyday life at the orphanage, with theatre, the children’s court of law, handicraft hours at the workshop, the doors that remain open… But the strength of both children and adults at the orphanage grows weaker. On August 2nd, 1942, Janusz Korczak, the teacher Stefania Wilczyńska (his right-hand-woman) and approximately 200 children are forced to the ghetto’s transfer point by SS members and eventually deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. That is where their tracks disappear forever.

**Or do they?**

The “Three Basic Rights of the Child”, put forth by Korczak in the mid-20s of the last century and later picked up by the United Nations for their Declaration of Children’s Rights, continues to spark lively debate to this day, with sentences such as: “I, Janusz Korczak, demand the Magna Charta Liberates as a Basic Law for the child.”
Words, that will cause you to reflect on them –

important quotations of the pedagogue and writer Janusz Korczak

**My greatest fault is that I am no longer a child.**

**The soul of a child is as complicated and full of contradictions as our soul is.**

**It is not that a child will become a human being, it is one already.**

**I exist not to be loved and admired, but to love and act. It is not the duty of those around me to love me. Rather, it is my duty to be concerned about the world, about man.**

**Don’t try to become a teacher overnight with psychological bookkeeping in your heart and educational theory in your head.**

**Whatever has been achieved through pressure and violence is unstable, unreliable and incorrect.**

**I am a butterfly drunk with life. I don’t know where to soar, but I won’t allow life to clip my beautiful wings.**

**I have signed a pact with life: we will not get in each other’s way.**

**Each person carries an entire world within himself, and everything exists twice: once the way it is, the other the way he perceives it with his own eyes and feelings.**

**Dare to dream. Something will always come of it.**

**To reform the world means to reform upbringing.**

**Take a look at the world an laugh.**

**Children are not the people of tomorrow, but people today. They are entitled to be taken seriously. They have a right to be treated by adults with tenderness and respect, as equals.**
In order to better understand the pedagogue:

Extracts from Korczak’s life

In the orphanage „Dom Sierot” a children’s court decided upon “incidents” and conflicts. It’s judicial judgements were based on a body of laws which contained 1000 paragraphs, whereby the paragraphs from 100 to 1000 moved forward in steps of 100. The kids probably wanted to impress somebody with this strange counting.

The higher the number of the paragraph, the greater was the sin that the judges had to decide upon.

When Janusz Korczak came to the homes of wealthy people, he usually got a princely reward for his medical help.

But if the patient was a poor, Christian child, he asked for nothing.

If the patient was a poor Jewish child, the doctor accepted a copeck (a currency unit) as a symbolic payment for his help. Since the Talmud says that “an unpaid doctor cannot help a sick person.”

In 1929, a long cherished dream of Janusz Korczak came true. The journal “Unsere Rundschau” (“Our review”), the largest Jewish daily newspaper in Warsaw, provided him with a place for a children’s supplement.

„Die Kleine Rundschau“ (“The little review”), a newspaper supplement from and for children, was born.

The supplement was primary intended for Jewish children only, but more and more gentile children joined the editorial staff enthusiastically, which also had an impact on the readership.
In the summer colony, Janusz Korczak, who was a fan of statistics, designed a „brawl-curve“. He counted the fights between the children and illustrated their frequencies in a curve diagram. Korczak pinned this curve diagram with detailed data on the notice board of the orphanage, where everyone could see it. After this measure, the fights between the children lessened.

After the occupation of Warsaw by German armies in the end of September, 1939, Janusz Korczak was forced to go to prison. He refused to wear the armband with the Yellow Star.

Former pupils of Korczak ransomed ”their doctor“. Several months of Korczak's prison sentence were converted into a financial penalty, one part of the required 3000 zloty were paid directly, another part was paid by installments.

Janusz Korczak, anyways, still refused to wear the armband.

In 1935, a German translation of Korczaks juvenile book „Der Bankrott des kleinen Jack“ (”The bankruptcy of little Jack”) was published by the „Williams-Verlag“ in Berlin. There might have been two reasons, why this book escaped the German censorship:

1. The name “Janusz Korczak“ did not necessarily indicate a Jewish author.
2. The content was „neutral“ and did not have a Jewish background.
Five major works from and about Janusz Korczak –
Tips from the European Janusz Korczak Akademy (EJKA)

... five works from Janusz Korczak:

- “How to love a child and other selected works”
  (2018; Polish first edition: 1919)

- “The Child’s Right to Respect”
  (Polish first edition: 1928)

- “King Matt the First”
  (2004; Polish first edition: 1923)

- “Ghetto Diary”
  (1942)

- “When I am little again”
  (1925)

... five works about Janusz Korczak
including two tips for young readers:

- “The King of Children: The Life and Death of Janusz Korczak”
  Betty Jean Lifton, 2006

- “Korczak – A voice for the child”
  Sandra Josephs & Janusz Korczak, 1999

- “Janusz Korczak’s children”
  Gloria Spielman & Matthew Archambault, 2007

- “Blumka’s diary”
  Iwona Chmielewska, 2011

- “The champion of Children”
  Tomek Bogacki, 2009
What we connect with Janusz Korczak –
Quotations from board members and employees

What connects me with Janusz Korczak:
- His deep empathy for the human being itself, especially his ability to capture the childlike soul and its needs
- His sense of justice
- His creativity for the practical solution of problems
- His courage never to give up
- The ability to admit his mistakes, especially towards children, and his ability to correct those mistakes
- His magnitude in his modesty and much, much more.

'E exist not to be loved and admired, but to love and act. It is not the duty of those around me to love me. Rather, it is my duty to be concerned about the world, about man.'

Janusz Korczak’s life motto has been motivating me for many years. These words also characterize our work at the Academy.

For me, Janusz Korczak is...
- A prominent scientist in the field of pedagogy, author of innovative methods for upbringing, that became the foundation of the ‘UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’;
- A brilliant teacher, who established a unique system of education for the upcoming generation, which is vitally important in our modern pedagogy;
- A person, who selflessly committed himself to his cause, his children, whose fate he shared until the end.

With Janusz Korczak I combine a deep admiration for his finely-tuned observation skills and his openness to face children as equal human beings and his will to learn from them. His deep humanity, his humanism and courage, which mirrors in all of his work up until his sad ending, turn him into an example for many and fill me with hope, that his life will have an effect on our era and on further generations.

Eva Haller, Chairwoman of the Board, President of the Academy

Dr. Stanislav Skibinski, Executive Manager

Dr. Boris Ginzburg, Member of the Board

Lydia Bergida, Program Director
Janusz Korczak was a great visionary in a difficult time. Saving lives is one of the world’s greatest challenges and Korczak dedicated his life to this task like hardly any other. Janusz Korczak is referred to as a great humanist and co-creator of children’s and human rights. This is absolutely justified.

With Janusz Korczak I connect an open-hearted person with incredibly strong visions and an incomprehensibly great helpfulness. He was a real fighter.

‘The way I took to reach my aim is neither the shortest nor the most convenient one; but for me it is the best because it’s mine.’

Janusz Korczak was a person, whose distinct realism did not prevent him from following his visions. This is something that truly inspires me.

Especially in current times I connect the discussion of including Korczak’s children’s rights into the German constitution with Janusz Korczak.

Janusz Korczak was a visionary, who was years ahead of his time. His deep humanity moves and guides my activities in and for the Academy.
Related Links

For further information regarding Janusz Korczak, his life and achievements, please refer to the following websites:

1. Website of the European Janusz Korczak Academy:
   https://www.ejka.org/en/content/janusz-korczak

2. Website of the German Janusz Korczak society (e.V.)
   https://www.janusz-korczak.de/ueber-janusz-korczak/

3. YouTube-Channel of the European Janusz Korczak Academy
   https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzjS8wjqV9NQYPe0eiF2NiQ
Bibliography


Korczak, Janusz: “The child’s right to respect”, Polish first edition: 1928


