



Who was Janusz Korczak?

Life and work of the educator, writer and doctor

*by Katrin Diehl
2020*

In 1878, it could also have been a year later... the father was not very precise about stamps and dealing with the authorities. So maybe in 1878 Janusz Korczak, whose real name was Henryk Goldszmit, was born in Warsaw.

And everything had its order. His family belonged to assimilated Judaism, was highly respected in the city and led a good life.

When Henryk is 17 years old, his father dies.

As a successful lawyer, he had provided for the family's prosperity, suffered from depression and had to go to a psychiatric clinic several times.

Henryk is deeply affected. He takes on odd jobs to keep himself, his mother and his sister Anna afloat.

As a child, he had already had a remarkably curious and sensitive eye for the plight of others, especially children of the same age. Now as a young man he felt first-hand what it meant to be poor.

After school, which he turned his back on with relief - he had no idea of the black pedagogical methods of the time - Janusz Korczak began to study medicine in Warsaw in 1898. The fact that he was guided from the outset by his claim to do justice to the child, to be at his side, is reflected in his literary works, which accompany all his activities. He writes about children, for children, in newspapers and magazines, and later has an educational advice programme on the radio. ("Fröhliche Pädagogik"), which is extremely popular with listeners. As a writer Henryk Goldszmit adopted a new name as a writer: Janusz Korczak is what he calls himself. Under this name he becomes known as "Doctor Janusz Korczak".

Janusz Korczak practised in various hospitals, worked in summer colonies for children and travelled to the major cities of Europe to look over the shoulders of his colleagues.

In 1911 he took over as director of the newly founded Jewish orphanage "Dom Sierot" in Warsaw, Krochmalnastrasse 92. He remained its director until its dissolution in 1942. The orphanage is his realm, here he has the opportunity to make his ideas and thoughts, paper theories, come true. Here he creates his "children's republic", in which children have a say and a say in decisions, thought out down to the last detail ("Put footstools under every window so that even the little ones can see out!") and full of original ideas that appeal to children's thinking ("There, on my shelf, is the glass bottle that I fill with the children's tears...").

Everyday life for a child requires structure and regularity, Janusz Korczak thinks, and the Jewish holidays also serve this purpose - above all, Shabbat, to which Janusz Korczak opened the door in his orphanage (if the children had not already done so). Korczak was a Jew and all the more so the more distant he felt from religion. So holidays are a permanent feature of the orphanage, even a few invented ones (holiday for the first snow, being allowed to stay in bed all day...).

Janusz Korczak observes his children closely, he has to accept setbacks, rethink his ideals. Sometimes he overtaxes his children because he trusts them with everything, sometimes they overtax him,

sometimes he makes life difficult for his helpers. Janusz Korczak was not an easy person. But the work in his "cathedral" fulfils him and makes him very tired.

Janusz Korczak took part in the First World War as the head doctor of a divisional hospital. In 1918 his book "How to Love a Child" was published. In it he describes his view on the child, as well as his demands on adults to rethink the way they treat children. In 1926 he founds the first children's newspaper in the world made by children for children ("Kleine Rundschau").

In 1933, the National Socialists come to power in Germany. Janusz Korczak travels twice to Palestine, takes a look at kibbutz life and is deeply impressed. Here something could be built if the longing for his Poland, for his Warsaw and his children were not so great... He returns home.

In 1939, the first German troops invade Poland. In 1940, the Jewish ghetto was established in Warsaw in 1940, to which all the Jews of the city had to move. Korczak's orphanage also moves there. "The Doctor" is sickly and weak. Every morning he goes out with a sack on his back and asks the ghetto inhabitants to give something for the children. Food, that is the most important thing now. It is almost as important to maintain a daily routine in the orphanage with the theatre group, the children's court, the handicrafts in the workshop, with all the doors that should always be open... But the strength of the children and the strength of the adults in the house wane. On 2 August 1942, Janusz Korczak and the educator Stefania Wilczynska (Korczak's balancing, right-hand woman) and about 200 children were driven by SS troops to the Warsaw Ghetto transshipment point and taken to the Treblinka extermination camp. "There their traces are lost."

No, they are not.

All those who deal with Janusz Korczak inevitably also come into contact with the children who were allowed to experience him. All those who deal with Janusz Korczak find themselves in the not easy but delightful and rewarding position of engaging with the children around them. So as long as there are children, there is a great chance not to lose the traces that Janusz Korczak, his educators and, of course, his children have left in his house.

The "three basic rights for the child" formulated by Janusz Korczak in the 1920s, which have found expression in the legal text of the UN, offer something to talk about and a starting point that gives rise to some hope:

"I, Janusz Korczak, call for the Magna Charta Libertatis as a fundamental law for the child. Perhaps there are others - but these are the three fundamental rights I have identified:

1. The child's right to die.
2. The child's right to the present day.
3. The right of the child to be as he is."