Life & Times

Dr Janusz Korczak: hero of the Warsaw ghetto and educator

DEDICATION
Janusz Korczak was born in 1878 into an assimilated Polish Jewish family in Warsaw.1 Korczak’s father was a lawyer. Unfortunately, his father developed mental illness and eventually ended up in an asylum, deserting his family, or so it seemed to the young boy. Rather like Dickens in Victorian London, social descent brought young Janusz into contact with the poor. Studying medicine, he chose paediatrics and met many Jewish orphans. He decided to dedicate his life to them and not have children of his own.

HEROIC
If Janusz Korczak is remembered in the UK today, as he was in a recent novel,2 it is because of the heroic manner of his death. Having dedicated his life to the orphans, he did not abandon them when Poland was invaded in 1939. The Nazis built the walls of the ghetto around the half a million Jews in Warsaw. Although we know of several well-documented offers of relative safety on the Aryan side, Korczak steadfastly refused to leave his orphans.

Famous throughout Europe as a writer on the education of children and as a writer of children’s books, he used his fame only as a tool to beg for food for his orphans. His extraordinary courage was evident from the start, for he refused to wear the prescribed armband with the Star of David, because of the heroic manner of his death. Korczak steadfastly refused to have a parliament of children running an orphanage and able to criticise the staff.

But his life of utter dedication, dedication unto death, bore fruit. Now for that poem of Szlengel’s written just after his death:

‘Today I saw Janusz Korczak, As he walked with the children in the last procession. And the children were in really clean clothes, As if they were going in a walk in the gardens on Sunday … Someone dashed up with a paper in his hand, “You can go back … there’s a card from Brandt.”’

Korczak shook his head silently, How could he get into those unfeeling heads What it means to leave a child alone?’

Gervase Vernon, GP, Essex.

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REFERENCES

"When the call came to take his orphans to the railhead, the Umschlagplatz, for embarkation to certain death, he led them in good order."