

#### DEDICATION

Janusz Korczak was born in 1878 into an assimilated Polish Jewish family in Warsaw.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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, enduring one spell in the ghastly Pawiak prison as a result. When the call came to take his orphans to the railhead, the *Umschlagplatz*, for embarkation to certain death, he led them in good order.

We have many eyewitness accounts, for he was one of the most distinctive people in the ghetto, wearing his Polish army greatcoat at all times. The march lasted for 4 hours on a hot summer's day (6 August 1942). Korczak and the orphans were all starving and in poor health. At the *Umschlagplatz* they had to wait in the shade of a wall for some further hours. The

last witness to see them, Nachum Remba, reported that they marched smartly into the railway carriage with Korczak at the head. Korczak's heroic death entered into the ghetto myth almost straight away. The poet of the ghetto, Władysław Szlengel, wrote a poem about it immediately afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

#### NO WASTED LIFE

Was Korczak's life wasted, killed with all his orphans by the Nazis? By no means. He had spent the previous 40 years running orphanages. He had steadfastly refused to write a systematic treatise about how to bring up children. However, he did write prolifically about children: an anthology, *How to Love a Child*, and a book, *The Child's Right to Respect*, which remains in print in English. He also wrote children's books built on the same ideas, *King Matt the First* being the best known. Finally, he had a popular radio programme, *The Old Doctor*. As Władysław Szpilman wrote:

*'Korczak's true value was not "what he wrote" but that he lived as he wrote.'*<sup>4</sup>

#### CHILDREN FIRST

What were his ideas? So revolutionary at the time, many now seem to us to be obvious. They have been summarised as follows:

*'At the centre of Korczak's educational philosophy are several basic principles: the child must be fully recognized, his soul and his special world must be understood, and his right to dignity and love must be fully recognized. In his opinion, childhood is not a preparation period for life but life itself.'* (from Hebrew Wikipedia)

Outlandish in the 1920s, such ideas are now widely accepted. He was certainly not the only one to write along these lines: one can think of John Dewey in America, or Pestalozzi in Switzerland. But his ideas had a direct effect on the UN Convention on the

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Rights of the Child (1989), which the Polish delegation, much influenced by his ideas, had a leading role in drafting.<sup>5</sup> In the UK, the Children's Act (1989) similarly states that children's welfare should be the paramount concern. Of course, not all of his ideas have stood the test of time. Who would dare, even now, as he did, 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?'*

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