Jadwiga Bińczycka
Poland

Janusz Korczak –
Champion of Children’s Rights

Before I begin my presentation, I would like to apologize for my poor English and my frail voice. The condition of my voice is, I would say a sort of side effect of my profession – I have been lecturing for many years. I ask for your tolerance.

So, let’s get started!

There are several issues which I would like to speak to you about. I am here to suggest some answers to the following questions:

- What is the history of the formation of human and children’s rights?
- What was the role that Janusz Korczak and his ideas played in this history?
- How did Korczak’s view of a child (as a part of his philosophy) influence the general understanding of children’s rights?
- Did the Convention on the Children’s Rights which was signed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989 – mean that process of children’s emancipation was completed and the problem was solved once and forever.
- Children’ Rights - do they really exist or are they only declarations with no implementation?
- And finally, what is the role of the World Korczak Movement and the Korczak Association of Poland in making children’s rights a reality?

One of the most important components of mankind’s history is its struggle with different kinds of injustice, violence, and constraint. The main goal of this struggle is to become free of injustice, and to obtain the rights to liberty. This is how our understanding of human rights is born.

Let me give you some historical examples.

In ancient times slaves had no right to freedom and sometimes even to life. They were treated as animals, and at times even worse. Later, the social position of serfs was similar - they had no rights to liberty or security. Women suffered from the same misfortune. The Woman Liberation Movement tried relentlessly to establish equal rights and privileges for men and women. As you see – a
human being, a social group or any minority without human rights are seen as worthless, and become subjects of extortion.

In this context, children can be described as the last minority of human kind that has not been set free. That was Janusz Korczak’s idea.

Janusz Korczak was one of the first advocates, spokesmen and real protectors of children’s rights.

According to him: “It is not that a child will become a human being, he is one already.” He believed that children were fully fledged human beings and should be treated and respected as ones. He showed that children are underprivileged “class” as he called this group of population, and they should be emancipated. Korczak called the community of children “a diminutive nation” which – I quote – “had been forgotten in the great historical transformations from the struggle for the abolition of slavery to the struggle for equal rights for women”.

Korczak stressed: “Children and youth represent 1/3 part of mankind, the childhood constitutes 1/3 part of life. Children will not be fully fledged human beings in future, they are fully human now. They ought to own 1/3 of wealth of the earth – and that they have to have on the basis of law rather than favour or courtesy. The fruits of 1/3 part of human activities should belong to them “.

Children can’t be treated as a kind of property of adults, but rather like their partners. It is not just enough to love children. Korczak emphasized: “I strongly believe – we must put an end to the fiction of our affection, sweetness, kind heartiness in our attitude towards children and we rather need to talk about their rights”.

What kind of rights?

Korczak wrote – I quote: ”I require a Magna Carta (Basic Charter ) of the rights of a child. I came upon three basic rights; but perhaps there are more of them:

1/ The right of a child to his/her own death
2/ The right of a child to the present day
3/ The right of a child to be what he/she is”

The first one can be shocking; it is not easy to understand this right. Don’t interpret it literally. What Korczak intended to say was that a child wanted to freely discover the world. However, very often parents don’t allow him/her to be active because he/she might… get dirty or even worse - harm himself or herself
The adults are afraid of their own death and because of that they incline to take care of their children’s life to the extent that they don’t allow them to live.

The right to his/her own death interpreted in this way is closely connected with the second one – the right of a child to the present day.

The second right is the right of a child to the present day.

Korczak observed how adults neglect the actual child’s experience, his or her “here and now” and think only or mostly about his/her life in future.

Korczak wrote – I quote: “We should respect the present hour, the present day. How will the child be able to live tomorrow if we don’t let him/her live today conscientiously and responsibly?............................ We shouldn’t neglect them, restrict their present life by reference to the future, we shouldn’t hurry or hurt them. We should respect every moment of their life, because it passes by and will not be repeated; and we should take every moment seriously. When it is not taken seriously it leaves a wound, when it is lost it leaves a bad reminiscence. Let the children enjoy in an unconcerned and trusting way the joy of the early morning. This is how the child likes it”.

Korczak added: “A child has the right his sadness to be respected, even if it is only about a pebble that he/she has lost.”

Korczak stressed the right of child to err and then he wrote;” Let us allow children to make mistakes and help them joyfully to improve themselves”.

The third right – the right of a child to be what he/she is.

What does it mean?

Let me quote Joop Berding’s / the known member of Dutch Korczak Association/ interpretation which is very similar to mine.

He writes:
“We should leave behind illusions of an “ideal child” and look at every young individual as he/she really is , with all his/her possibilities and shortcomings.

We should have confidence in children and rule out exaggerative expectations. Nowadays many problems in education arise from the ambitions of parents who are disappointed when the child does not meet their expectations. To have confidence also means giving the child time to find things out for his/herself, the time that is appropriate to his/her personal abilities. It means not to rush them. The same way as an educator is not almighty, a child is not completely
“makeable”. Pedagogy in its practical implementation finds its limits in a child. Korczak accepts every child in his/her uniqueness”.

This interpretation indicates that Korczak believes in capability of self education of the child. Self education is very important and effective. Adults can only help children in the process of self development.

Korczak helped children of his Orphanage creating good atmosphere in Dom Sierot and establishing a real dialogue with the children.

There were common rules in the Orphanage. All members of this community – without any differences of age or position – were subjects to the same rules. These rules were protected by the Children’s Court which played the essential role in the Orphanage’s life. Here the children were judges and they during special sessions – decided who was guilty or who was not. In smaller cases, following decision was taken: “We forgive you, we forget”.

Korczak himself stood in front of the Children Court several times and was judged by children. This way Korczak wanted to stress that there were common rules and one ethics for everyone.

That helped the Orphanage to become a community of mutual friends, social harmony, cooperation, and common moral principles which were introduced in everyday life. They were not presented as a kind of sermon given by wiser adults who had a higher morality; but instead, the moral principles were issues to discuss about and decide upon.

Korczak expressed this idea of him as follows – I quote: “We don’t give you anything. We don’t give you God, because you have to search for Him in your own heart…. We don’t give you Motherland, because you will have to find that by your own effort and your own thinking. We don’t give you love of Man, because there is no love without forgiving and forgiving is difficult, it is a hard job which everyone has to undertake himself.

We only give you one thing – the longing for a better life, which doesn’t exist yet but will exist in future, and that will be the life in truth and justice. Perhaps this longing will bring you to God, to Motherland and to love “.

Korczak verified these moral principles in his own life and it was of a great significance for his pupils /and I think for us as well/.

He also proposed the possibility of creating a society where all members including children have equal and real rights.
Korczak mentioned the right of a child to be respected in many of his works but one of them has this particular title: “The Right of a Child to Respect”. In this book, Korczak is a splendid diagnostician of the situation of a child in the world of adults, and of the relations between adults and children.

According to Korczak’s ideas and contemporary pedagogical and psychological knowledge we can describe the relations between adults and children in the following way:

(1) ADULT above ch
(2) CHILDREN under a
(3) A ◊ CH beside
(4) A ↔ CH with

Model (1) is typical for autocratic power. Adults are on the top, children at the bottom - children belong to adults, they have to obey them without any discussion.

Model (2) shows the opposite situation – children are on the top, they subordinate adults to their needs and emotions.

Model (3) – adults and children are beside each other, but they don`t really know each other, they are indifferent toward each other and sometimes even hostile toward each other.

Model (4) is the best one. Here a real dialogue, mutual respect and mutual acceptance take place. Here the adults – parents and educators – are not talking to children but speaking /discussing/ with children. Speaking with children instead of to them – it was the main principle of Korczak’s life and pedagogy. The relation with children instead of “above”, “under” or “indifferent beside” – is the best test whether the children’s rights are real.
In model (1) children’ rights are only verbal declaration. Similar is in model (2) and model (3).

So, the reality of children’s rights and the types of interpersonal relations between adults and youth are inseparably connected.

What kind of situation can we observe today?

There are people who don’t believe in the necessity of the rights for children. Those are even among teachers!

I have met young students who sincerely asked me: “Do you think we really have rights? It’s unbelievable!” I have also met a very skeptical student who, after my enthusiastic lecture about children’s rights which was delivered at school – said to me “What you are talking about! Nobody can win a teacher“. And I must say it is a pretty common opinion among students. They know rather language of fight than language of cooperation, dialogue, mutual respect, and equal rights.

What can we say about the right to live in the world, where the children are the first victims of wars, poverty, and deportations?

What can we say about the right to live without abuse in the society where the acceptance for corporal punishment still exists? We can meet with next opinion: if you are beating adults – it is a violent assault, if you are beating the animal – it is cruelty, when you are beating a child – it is okay, it is for his/her benefit.

Sorry to say but such an attitude towards a child one can still see in Poland, and not so rarely. There are not too many people who oppose to this kind of abuse.

What can we say about the right to education watching the emigrants whose children don’t know the language of the country where they live and have lots of troubles with learning?

I could put more questions and examples, but it is enough…

So, my conclusion is that the struggle for real children rights is still on, and the Convention on the Children’s Rights signed by the General Assembly of United Nations in 1989 rather started than finished process of child’s emancipation.

What should we do to speed up this process?

What can be the role of the World Korczak Movement and the Korczak Associations members in particular? This is a good topic for discussion.
Now, I would like to provide you some information about the activity of the Korczak Association of Poland, especially in the children’s rights defense.

We talk about children’s rights; we popularize them wherever we can. We organize conferences and we publish books. To name just a few of them: “The children’s rights– declarations and reality”, “The right of a child to health “, “The right of a child to security”, “Great humanists about children’s rights” and so on.

These conferences often are followed by art programs which are prepared by children. I would like to mention one of them titled “I have right to my rights” /Łejery – School Theater - photo/. That was a beautiful and authentic program. The spectators and among them mostly teachers, pedagogues and psychologists were deeply touched by it.

In 2009 and 2010 we attended the International Seminar “Janusz Korczak - the Polish- Jewish Pioneer of Children`s Rights and the Convention on the Right of a Child as a subject of International Law” which took place in Geneva. There were very interesting discussion with the representatives of the International Korczak Association and Committee on the Rights of a Child of the United Nations /UN/.

We closely cooperate with Mr. Marek Michalak – the Ombudsman of the Children’s Rights in Poland and with many NGO’s. For example – I would like to say something about one of them, about the International Chapter of the Order of Smile.

Order of Smile is a unique in whole world prize granted by children to those adults, who opened their heart for their needs, showed their kindness and patience, regardless of skin color, place of residence, nationality or religion. The idea was created in Poland however the proposals of nominees are sent by children also from other countries. The international status of Order was granted by the decision of UN Secretary General in 1979.

For over 40 years there were 900 persons admitted to the group of the Knights of Order of Smile from over the world. Among others: John Paul II, Dalajlama XIV, Mother Theresa from Calcuta…/ look at the phothos/.

The youngest Knight to ever receive Order of the Smile was Marek Michalak in 1994, then aged 23, the oldest Dame was Irena Sendlerowa in 2007, aged 97. / Hope you have heard about her – she saved from death 2500 Jewish children from Warsaw ghetto/.

There are the knights of Order of Smile from Canada. Among them – Elisabeth Kiegler, Krystyna Piotrowska / Polish Radio – Toronto/, James Rutka – pediatrician, Teresa Skibicka / Foundation Heritage of Polish Women in
The pretty big group of the Knights of the Order of Smile is at Polish Korczak Association. I am happy – I belong to this group too./ photo/ The ceremony of decorating is very festive and joyful. Every nominee has to drink a glass of citron juice with the smile on his/her face, / phothos of S, Spielberg, Irena Conti Di Mauro, Dalajlama, James Rutka/, everybody vows: “I am promising to be cheerful and to bring the joy for children”.

Then – you can agree with me- the idea of the Order of Smile is very near by Korczak`s dreams about joyful childhood and the best relation between adults and children / model 4/.

Polish Korczak Association organizes many activities dealt with children’s rights in whole Poland, some of them in bigger cities and some in small towns such as Borzęciczki, Jaroszów, Korczakowo.

Not long ago I attended the Fourth School Students’ Council in small town of Ilawa where students of the secondary school for handicapped children presented their visions of children’s rights. These visions were presented on the great posters. / photos from Ilawa/. That was a conclusion of the discussion on this issue that lasted a whole year.

We organized workshops dedicated to this topic in kindergartens as well. The little kids are asked to draw what they think about their rights. The best of these drawings that depict their right to love, to have a family, to play etc, are published in the form of a calendar./ photos and calendar /

For a few times we have organized the Day of Kites. Many kites with children’s rights written on them flew up towards the sky./photos/ Maybe some of those kites fell into the hands of people who had not believed in children’s rights as yet. And maybe these people decided then to change their minds.

We believe that those who are children now and are going to be adults of tomorrow will be the good advocates of children’s rights.

I also believe that they will support the fourth model of the relation between adults and children – the model of dialogue and partnership. Ultimately, Korczak said that salvation of the world will come from children.

And I absolutely agree with him.
Thank you for your attention.

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