

The Home for Orphans as the Children's Republic

Henryk Goldszmit grew into the famous Janusz Korczak on the rich soils of Polish culture and, at the same time, he himself made the Polish culture grow richer.

He was an inseparable part of assimilated Jewish Warsaw – the city that filled his heart and, at the same time, was filled with his presence.

As far as his understanding of a child goes, he - unlike many other authors and pedagogues - did not just **describe** children's life. Instead he **lived**, if I may say, his and their life in one.

In Canada, where I moved from Russia bringing Korczak with me, he was hardly known, may be just to a couple of people. But it happened to be in Canada where I met not a bookish or legendary Old Doctor - like I knew before - but Korczak alive.

That is how it happened.

One day a sad duty brought me to a Jewish graveyard.

There was an obelisk there and symbolic tombstones with the names of people who perished in the Holocaust and whose families reside in Vancouver. Among them I suddenly noticed the name of Henryk Goldszmit. Korczak did not have any descendants - who then inscribed his name in that sorrowful list?

A little investigation led me to the house of the granddaughter of doctor Isaac Eliasberg who had been a long-standing chairman of the Warsaw 'Help the

Orphans' Association and, together with Korczak, a founder of the Home for Orphans.

Soon after that I met several of Korczak's pupils. They had brought Korczak to Canada much earlier than I did.

My conversations with them prompted me to focus not only on what Korczak had written about his Home, but what children had said about their Home.

Trying to piece together the Home's life, I made use of materials from various sources: Korczak's writings, articles written by his colleagues, reports of the 'Help the Orphans' Association, other archival records and – above all – recollections of his pupils.

Still it was not enough.

Feeling in the gaps, I - in my mind of course - made the Orphanage my home and spent several months under the warm wings of Doctor Goldszmit and his assistant Stefania Wilczyńska.

As a canvas for this reconstruction I chose a collection of commemorative postcards hand-written by Korczak, which the children would receive at the Home as a sign of their achievements.

These artefacts are iconic in Korczak's pedagogy as they reveal its specific character: the techniques appeared simple but the results turned out to be extremely effective.

The postcards were made available to me by Mr. Leon Gluzman, a gentleman, 95 years of age, a pupil of the Home from 1923 to 1930, and later a successful Canadian businessman and generous philanthropist.

There were hundreds if not thousands of the postcards that were given out at the Home. How many of them managed to survive the Holocaust?

Just a few. They were preserved or rather saved thanks to the fact that Leon Gluzman while emigrating from Poland to Canada on his own, as a 14 year old boy, had taken them with him as the dearest treasures of his childhood.

The postcards were awarded in recognition of work in the Home's Council, for rotas, to record that a child got up without wasting time etc.

Life at the Home was organized in a democratic fashion. The Parliament was in progress, and the children sat there together with the adults.

A crucial part of Self-government was the Court of Peers. The clauses of the Court Codex were only a warning; the goal was not to punish but to forgive.

More importantly, pupils as well as educators were brought before the Court as they were citizens of equal rights.

Plebiscites also took place. Children presented their opinion of a particular pupil, then the Parliament counted the number of votes. That allowed the children to see themselves reflected in the eyes of the others. On the last farewell card the plebiscite result was added.

It's worthy to note that as charismatic as Korczak was and, no doubt, his role at the Home was significant, the daily so called system of life that had been introduced

there worked perfectly even in his absence - for example during WWI when he served in the army. Isn't that the best proof of democracy when the law and not the person prevails?

The Home lived on donations. But without 'self-help' it could not have survived. Everyone contributed to the running of it – without exception. However, – apart from those rotas that were a responsibility for everyone - the children would choose their own field of work.

After the first year of the Home, in 1913, Korczak described the challenge undertaken/ as follows: 'The transformation of a hundred children into a hundred workers, is a task that is unbelievably difficult.'

By 1920 Korczak summed up: 'This year has finished as a triumph for us. Four staff members – for a hundred children. The master, worker and director of the Home has become – the child.'

For the most responsible rota children received a small remuneration - for money management was a part of education.

'It is known from the Home's history that Korczak would collect milk teeth from the children. In reality, he would buy them from the children. He wished the children to have some money. He didn't wish to give it 'for free' – so he would buy their property – a milk tooth.'

To have a personal property at the Home was a right.

One more democratic principle reigned there – to have a freedom of choice.

Here is an example. Every three months, children would announce their readiness to participate in the 'early rising programme'. Those that got up early without a reminder would receive a postcard, as Korczak put it, "as a sign of their small victories over themselves".

Engagement in sports was also voluntary. However, the effort of children in the 'hard work of growing' - as Korczak called it - was appreciated.

The same was with the Mentoring programme when older children looked after the juniors.

The Home was a secular institution but religious practice was allowed. Children would come forward for common prayers of their own accord.

Korczak's essay *Why do they pray?* presents not only the methods but also the effects of his work with children. It also shows how spirituality brightened everyday life of the little residents of the Home.

Here are tiny fragments from this essay:

'When all the boys gathered for daily prayers, I asked why they come to prayers.

The first said: 'Why wouldn't I pray? I am Jewish after all.

The second said: 'Poles pray and go to their church, so a Jew should be no worse'.

And another said: 'If a Jew doesn't pray, his sin brings punishment onto all Jews. And I do not wish that they suffer because of me.'

The last one said 'When you don't have a father, it is good to know that God is everyone's father, mine as well. '

Korczak wrote that he was planning to ask the others why they did not pray, but suddenly everything changed.

It sounds like he was stopped by somebody in the middle of the sentence. No wonder – the essay was written in the Warsaw Ghetto!

At the Home Jewish Holidays were observed. That tied the children to Jewish tradition.

But let's take a look at another kind of the postcards - those of Distinction. They were with a view of Warsaw because the Home is a part of Warsaw and a card provides a memento for those who in future might leave their family town.'

Jewish faith combined with love to the Polish capital – wasn't it the base of the double identity formation/ even if it was not then being formulated/expressed that way?

But note: for those who might leave their town?

To leave - why?

At that time even children would experience anti-Semitism.

Please listen to this fragment of an open letter written by the pupils of the Home and addressed to the children of Polish workers. The pupils asked for not to be teased, pushed, and beaten... "Leave us alone – for it means tears for us, and for you shame."

No doubt, as explicated by Korczak, the child's right to be their own self included their ethnic dignity.

However, in order to have the right to be who you are, you have to be someone first.

Korczak's primary goal was to help children to become someone, to be aware of their own thoughts and deeds.

In fact, Korczak's two fundamental children's rights: the right to be their (natural) self and the right to be respected, were taught as their duties: to choose their own way of life and to respect the others.

The biographies of Korczak's children are quite impressive.

What was the reason behind such a great life success of most of them?

Most likely, it was Korczak's focus on teaching children the authentic values of life rather than practical skills. That's right: Korczak's educational mode is rather one of principles than of methods. Provocatively, I would say that Korczak's unique pedagogy was, as a matter of fact, less pedagogical and more metaphysical.

Coming back to the postcards.

Former pupils would keep in touch with the Orphanage.

The last postcard in the Leon Gluzman's collection has absolute historical value. It was sent to Leon from the Warsaw ghetto.

Dearest Leon!

We ask you to send some food parcels to the Home for Orphans, for those weaker children.

Please inform the others, who still remember their childhood years.

Sincere regards,

Goldszmit (Korczak) and Stefa.

The postcard was written on September 10, 1941 and addressed to Ottawa Ontario via U.S.A/ über Lissabon. An understandable peculiarity - Canada was at war with Germany.

The card reached Ottawa in late November. Those in the Ghetto could receive the parcels only until December. It was then too late.

In August 1942 Korczak and his children were murdered in a Nazi extermination camp – the only reason for that was that they were Jewish.

I am often asked: Was Korczak's pedagogy Jewish?

I think it is very much possible - as tradition is a part of our unconscious-self. But, on the other hand, a part of our unconscious-self is also our language – in Korczak's case - Polish language, in which he spoke to his children and wrote his books.

Thank you.